Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 6, Issue 3 – Pages 211-234

Melville's New Seafarer's Philosophy in *Moby-Dick*

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Although Herman Melville's Moby-Dick is often viewed as a philosophical work, the paper argues that though it deals with philosophical issues, it is not a philosophical work in the traditional sense of producing arguments for theses. Rather, inspired by ancient Greek philosophy and ancient Babylonian myths, Moby-Dick seeks to disclose a kind of poetic philosophical truth that is more basic than propositional truth per se. The fundamental philosophical conviction that underlies Moby-Dick is the microcosmic view that traces to ancient Greek philosophy, roughly, the view that all mortal living organisms, including human beings and whales, are miniature images of the whole cosmos. The paper begins with a discussion of the main character and narrator of the book, the "ideal democratic man" and wanderer, Ishmael. Second, the paper explains the neglected microcosmic view in Moby-Dick. Third, the paper explains the "moral" dimension of Moby-Dick's microcosmic view, specifically, its view that knowledge of these ultimate cosmic truths is unattainable by human beings and that it is even dangerous to attempt to fathom such ultimate truths. Fourth, the paper argues that Moby-Dick is best seen as a kind of philosophical poetry rather than a standard argumentative philosophical work. Fifth, referring to the "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry discussed by Plato, the paper invokes certain Heideggerian ideas to explain how, in opposition to Plato, there can be a coherent kind of philosophical poetry of the sort found in Moby-Dick. Finally, the paper argues that it is one of the fundamental aims in Moby-Dick to distinguishes between the safe, civilized, rational philosophy of the "landsman" and the more adventurous dangerous poetic philosophy of the seafarers, thereby anticipating some of Nietzsche's views about a new kind of seafarer's philosophy in Thus Spake Zarathustra by almost a half century.

> I look upon metaphysical ideas as … flashes of light in … a dark night; and that … is all we can hope of metaphysics. It seems improbable that the first principles of things will ever be thoroughly known. The mice living in a few little holes in an enormous building do not know if the building is eternal, who is the architect, or why the architect built it. They [only] try to preserve their lives … We are the mice; and the divine architect who built the universe
> has not … told the secret to any of us.
>
> Voltaire[1]

Moby Dick is generally known as an adventure story about a monomaniacal Captain Ahab who sets off on a suicidal mission of revenge to kill a giant white whale (Moby-Dick) that took his leg in an earlier voyage. However, Ishmael, the narrator of the book, raises numerous philosophical issues.[2] Indeed, some of

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1. Voltaire, "First Letter to Frederick," *Letters of Voltaire and Frederick the Great*, trans. Richard Aldington (Paris: Brentano, 1927), 26.

2. By "philosophy" is here meant the metaphysical views that concern the *ultimate* nature of the universe, who, or what, created it (if it was created at all), how it

https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.6-3-3 doi=10.30958/ajha.6-3-3

Melville's acquaintances lamented that he often wanted to talk less about his novels than he did about Greek philosophy, in particular Plato and Aristotle.[3] The paper argues that, apart from some very general *convictions* about the nature of the universe, *Moby-Dick* does not state any precise philosophical *theses*. Rather, it belongs to that rare genre of philosophical works, including Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and some of Heidegger's later writings, that attempt to set the limits of philosophy.[4] There are four main claims in the paper. The first is that *Moby-Dick* advances the Ancient Greek *microcosmic* view that living organisms, like human beings and whales, are miniature copies of the whole cosmos.[5] The second is that understanding ourselves and the cosmos is beyond the limits of human comprehension, indeed, that it is suicidal to attempt to fathom ultimate cosmic truths. The third, concerning that "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry,"[6] is that *Moby-Dick* is more akin to poetry than to philosophy as ordinarily understood. The fourth is that *Moby-Dick* distinguishes between the traditional conception of rational philosophy, at home the land, and a more daring poetic philosophy that emerges from life on the chaotic seas of life.

The paper first discusses the philosophical significance of Ishmael's role in *Moby-Dick*. This is followed by a discussion of *Moby-Dick*'s microcosmic View. The paper then argues that *Moby-Dick* holds that knowledge of the cosmos and microcosms is unattainable and dangerous for human beings. On this basis, the paper argues that *Moby-Dick* is really a kind of philosophical poetry rather than a novel proper. The paper proceeds to argue that *Moby-Dick* attempts to disclose a kind of poetic truth that is more fundamental than propositional truth. Finally, the paper argues that that *Moby-Dick* expresses a new kind of "seafarer's" philosophy that anticipates Nietzsche's view of philosophy in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

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was created, for what purpose, and in what sense, if any, it is good or beautiful. Derivative philosophical issues concerning proper behavior, taste, and the like are not at issue here.

3. Mark Anderson, "Platonic and Nietzschean Themes of Transformation in Moby-Dick," in *Melville Among the Philosophers*, ed. Cory McCall and Tom Nurmi (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 27-31.

4. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (6.54, 7) holds that there are "mystical" things that cannot be "said" in words. Heidegger states that Heraclitus and Parmenides where not philosophers because they were "the greater thinkers." Heidegger sees metaphysical thinking as a decline from superior thinking of the Pre-Socratics. [Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Jean Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven: College and University Press, 1956), 53.]

5. For a brief account of Plato's notion of the Microcosm see McDonough [Richard McDonough, "Plato: Organicism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [I], §2.b. Retrieved from http://www.iep.utm.edu/platoorg/.

6. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Alan Bloom (New York and London: Basic Books, 1968), 607b-c.

Just Call Me Ishmael

Moby-Dick is founded on Ishmael's capacity for wonder …
Bender[7]

The justly famous opening line in the book, "Call me Ishmael," is particularly important for the present paper because, if anyone in *Moby-Dick* is a philosopher, it is Ishmael. Note, however, that Ishmael does not say that his name is Ishmael, but only that one can "call" him that. This indicates that his real name, and thus his real identity (his real name might be "Bob") are not important in the book. Ishmael is, therefore, the ideal "democratic" person.[8] For example, Ishmael admits that he has had a Presbyterian background, but he distances himself from it by treating all religions, even the most foreign, equally (Chap's. 10, 17). Thus, Ishmael, as the representative of that which is common to all humanity, is the guardian of the novel's deepest values:[9] "If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, … then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God!" (Chap. 26).

The second point is that the very name "Ishmael" connotes an outcast.[10] According to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Ishmael was the first son of Abraham, not conceived by his barren wife Sarah, but by her Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Thus, it is destined that the biblical Ishmael "shall be a wild donkey of a man" (Genesis 16: 2).[11] Similarly, Melville's Ishmael, like his Biblical counterpart, is a wanderer and a homeless person.[12] He is as comfortable with the Polynesian cannibal Queequeg as he is Presbyterian forbears. After being forced, with some trepidation into sharing a tiny bed with this unknown tattooed harpoon carrying cannibal stranger, Ishmael remarks, "Upon waking next morning …, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife." (Chap. 4).[13]

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7. Bert Bender, "Moby-Dick, An American Lyrical Novel," in *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 105.

8. Brian Way, *Herman Melville: Moby Dick* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 53.

9. Ibid.

10. Roland Sherrill, "The Career of Ishmael's Self-Transcendence," in *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 73.

11. The Biblical References in paper are to the *American Standard Bible*, but any reputable translation will do.

12. Way, *Herman Melville: Moby Dick*, 55.

13. Referring to the communal practice of squeezing the waxy whale spermaceti into a more manageable liquid, Ishmael remarks: "I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands

Ishmael, is not, however, merely the narrator of the book. For *Moby-Dick* is "born of Ishmael's capacity for wonder" (see epigraph above). At the end of Chap. I, he states that by joining the whaling voyage "the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open." Since, as Plato[14] explains, philosophy begins in wonder, it seems that Ishmael resembles a philosopher—and a wide range of philosophers, including, Pythagoras (Chap's 1, 98), Plato (Chap's 35, 55, 75, 78, 85, 101), Pyrrho (Chap. 85), Cato (Chap. 1), Aristotle (Chap's 32, 110), Seneca and the Stoics (Chap's. 1, 75), Descartes (Chap. 35), Locke (Chap. 73), Spinoza (Chap. 75), Kant (Chap. 73), and Burke (Excerpts and Chap. 24) are mentioned in *Moby-Dick*. Thus, the book is grounded in the specific kind of wonder experienced by this "ideal democratic person."

It is significant that *Moby-Dick's* "wonder-world" is encountered at sea, not on land, and that it is entered via "flood gates," that is, by water, not by an ordinary door on Main Street. The opposition between the land and "the watery part of the world" (Chap. I) is crucial in the book.

> The beauty-terror dichotomy … is often a contrast between physical appearances such as cats and tigers, days and nights, the ocean's surfaces and depths, male and female. These physical opposites frequently possess a metaphysical significance by symbolizing the difference between such concepts as thought and emotion, inner realities and outer appearances, truth and illusion. The novel is … replete with dual oppositions—good-evil, order-chaos, Christian-pagan, and so forth.[15]

Whereas the land represents the safe, superficial, part of the world, the sea represents the more dangerous deeper part of the world. The sea has a clear surface bathed in sunlight (Chap's. 81, 134), and a dark primordial deep inhabited by monsters (Chap. 14). Similarly, whereas the land symbolizes civilized order, the sea symbolizes primordial chaos.[16] These dichotomies also map onto the human psyche. The land symbolizes the "outer appearances," the bright orderly surface reason of humanity, while the sea symbolizes the unconscious chaotic

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in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. … Would that I could go on squeezing that sperm forever!"

14. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M. J. Levett (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 155c-d.

15. Frank Novak, "The Metaphysics of Beauty and Terror in Moby-Dick," in *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1986), 119-120.

16. *Moby-Dick* here follows the ancient Babylonian mythology in which the primeval goddess of the sea, Tiamat, personifies chaos [Lorena Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2004), 106, 117, 141, 174]. Significantly, Tiamat is sometimes identified as a sea serpent [Thorkild Jacobson, "The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1 (1968)]. Tiamat is also described as "the glistening one" [Joseph Campbell, *Occidental Mythology* (New York: Penguin Campbell, 1991), 77], and *Moby-Dick* describes both the sea and whales as "glistening" (Chap's. 54, 59, 61, 74, 133).

irrational "inner reality" of the human psyche.[17] Thus, Ishmael's choice to go to sea is the choice to eschew the safe, civilized, orderly rational world in favor of the darker, irrational, chaotic more dangerous part of the world. Since these features of the world are reflected in the human psyche, Ishmael's choice to go to sea, rather than stay on land, is also the choice to eschew the surface rationality of human existence in order to explore its darker largely unconscious irrational dimensions.

One must not, however, be hasty. To say that philosophy begins in wonder and that Ishmael experiences wonder at the "watery part of the world" world, does not mean that Ishmael is a philosopher proper. Philosophy may begin in wonder, but that does not mean that everyone who experiences wonder becomes a philosopher. For though many philosophers are mentioned in *Moby-Dick*, "the idealist metaphysician and transcendentalist philosopher[s]" are "almost always figures of fun in Melville's" works.[18] Indeed, in Chap. I of *Moby-Dick*, Melville singles out metaphysicians generally for fun. Referring to the "magic" of water, where water is "wedded forever" to "meditation," Ishmael remarks that if one is "athirst" in a caravan out "in the great American desert" that "happens to be supplied by a metaphysical professor" one will find that they will immediately "lead you to water." There are multiple levels to the joke here. First, Ishmael's remark that if one "happens to be supplied" with a metaphysical professor, just as it might happen to be supplied with a plumber, suggests that a metaphysician is not exactly an essential part of a caravan. Second, if water is essential for meditation, it seems that this "most absent minded of men plunged in his deepest reveries" has put himself in the place most unsuitable for meditation. Third, if one is really "athirst" in a desert, one hardly requires a metaphysical professor to lead one to water when anyone else on the caravan would do as well. Melville's philosophers are often so unworldly than that, like Thales, they are so abstracted that they cannot even see the well, the water needed for meditation, at their feet.[19]

Third, although one normally thinks that philosophy is a choice, Ishmael begins *Moby-Dick* with the remark that going to sea "is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship" (Chap. 1). One normally assumes that philosophizing is a free choice, not an alternative to suicide. Indeed, Ishmael's choice to go to sea is explicitly distinguished from Cato's "philosophical" act of suicide, which suggests

17. Jung following the alchemists, saw sea-water as a symbol of the collective unconscious, a mysterious all-pervading soul or essence (the "*anima mundi*"). [Carl Jung, *Mysterium Conjunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 278.]

18. Way, *Herman Melville: Moby Dick*, 12.

19. Reginald Allen, *Greek Philosophy: Readings in the History of Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 27.

that philosophy, *normally understood*, is akin to a kind of intellectual suicide. It seems that philosophizing is a kind of falling on one's sword. Whereas a philosopher, like a metaphysician searching for a drink of water in a desert before returning to their safe dry offices on College Avenue, is at home on land, Ishmael chooses the deeper and more dangerous path to the "wonder-world" at sea. Ishmael here suggests a possible distinction between two very different kinds of philosophers, the philosophers of the "landsmen" and the philosophers of the seafarers. But what is that fundamental sort of wisdom that can only be acquired at sea?

The Microcosmic View in *Moby-Dick*

> The ship [the *Pequod*] is a microcosm—a little world that symbolizes the world at large. The voyage is one of self-discovery, for the crew, and for you, too, as you think over the events of the journey.
> Fish[20]

The doctrine of the microcosm is, roughly, the view that living organisms are a miniature copy of the whole cosmos, or, as Schopenhauer[21] puts it, that a person's "inner being also exhausts the inner being of the whole world, the macrocosm." It is, therefore, a corollary of the microcosmic doctrine that "if one looks deeply enough into oneself, one will discover not only one's own essence, but also the essence of the universe."[22] If the self is a microcosm, then by achieving self-knowledge one *ipso facto* achieves knowledge of the nature of the world. The reverse is also true. One can learn about one's own nature by learning about the world. By coming to know the sea, or the whale, one comes to know oneself.

Some scholars see the first beginnings of the doctrine in Anaximenes, but there may even be a glimmer of the idea in Thales.[23] The Pythagoreans held that the *polis* is a microcosm of the cosmos.[24] However, the first sophisticated

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20. Peter Fish, *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick* (Hauppauge: Barrons Educational Series, 1987), 48.

21. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and as Representation, vol. 1*, trans. E. J. F. Payne (New York: Dover 1968), I, §29.

22. Robert Wicks, "Arthur Schopenhauer," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017, §4. Retrieved from https://stanford.io/2N2svhR.

23. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and as Representation, vol. 1*, I, §29; Peter Adamson, *Classical Philosophy: A History of Western Philosophy without any Gaps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

24. John Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Houghton Mifflin College Division, 1968), 78-81; Rosemary Wright, *Cosmology in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2013), 56-57, 70-72.

formulation of the cosmological view is in Plato[25] (see also Conger,[26] Cornford,[27] and Carone[28]). The doctrine is found in Neoplatonism and Leibniz,[29] and in Wittgenstein.[30] It also appears in various forms in a plethora of philosophers from ancient times to the present and in certain "mystical" arts like astrology and alchemy.[31]

On Plato's view, mortal living organisms form a hierarchy of less to more perfect where the higher an organism is on this scale of perfection the more closely it resembles the whole cosmos,[32] e.g., a human being and a frog are both miniature images of the cosmos but since a rational human is more perfect than a frog, it is more like the cosmos than the frog. Fish (see epigraph above) sees the microcosmic doctrine in *Moby-Dick* insofar as the ship, the *Pequod*, is a microcosm of the whole world, and that, therefore, the voyage on the ship is a voyage of self-discovery. However, *Moby-Dick*'s microcosmic doctrine is "metaphysically" much deeper than that.

Since the microcosmic doctrine is reflected throughout *Moby-Dick*, only a few of the key passages can be indicated here. It is stated in general form in Ishmael's remark: "O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter but has its cunning duplicate in mind" (Chap. 70). Not only is the soul of human beings analogous to Nature, but even the smallest *parts* of nature, atoms, have a soul that resembles the souls both of Nature and of human beings. The microcosmic doctrine is even present in Ishmael's reference to "the tornadoed Atlantic of my being." That is, my being, the being of the microcosm, is the same as that of the "tornadoed Atlantic" in the external world.

The doctrine is also found in Ishmael's remark, referring to the gold coin or "doubloon" with "strange figures and inscriptions stamped on it" that Ahab nailed to the mast as a reward to the first sailor who spotted Moby-Dick, that "this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self" (Chap. 99). The doubloon is a small image of the whole world ("the rounder globe"), but it is also

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25. Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 41d, 81a-b.

26. G. P. Conger, *Theories of Macrocosmos and Microcosms in the History of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1922), 7-11.

27. F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 39, 244, 328 n 4.

28. Gabriela Roxana Carone, *Plato's Cosmology and its Ethical Dimensions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 97-100, 140, 153, 158.

29. Stuart Brown, and N. J. Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Leibniz's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), xxxvi, 94, 148, 165.

30. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus-logico-philosophicus*, trans. David Pears and B. F. McGuiness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 5.63.

31. A. Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism* (Köln: Taschen, 1997).

32. A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (London: Routledge, 2017), 42, 59, 61, 252.

a mirror in which each human sees the reflection of "his own mysterious self." Since the *doubloon* resembles the whole world, but also resembles the human soul, each human being's image also resembles the whole world—and that is the microcosmic view. The passage continues: "Pity if there is nothing wonderful in signs, and significant in wonders! … Look you, Doubloon, your zodiac here is the life of man in one round chapter …" The strange figures and inscriptions stamped on the *doubloon* are a "zodiac," a circular path around the heavens that, according to astrology, mirrors "the life of man." The doubloon pictures the heavens, which, in turn, pictures human life. This microcosmic analogy between self and world is an occasion for "wonder." Thus, for Ishmael, philosophy begins, not in just any kind of wonder but in wonder at the analogy between the human microcosm and the macrocosm.[33]

The Ungraspable Phantom of Life

> And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.
> *Moby-Dick* (Chap. 1)

There is no need to speculate about the "key" to *Moby-Dick*. The novel identifies it as "the ungraspable phantom of life" portrayed in the story of Narcissus. That is the story from ancient Greek mythology of the beautiful but proud young man, Narcissus, who, when he saw his image reflected in water, fell so in love with it that he stared at it until he died,[34] a cautionary tale about the dangers of self-love and pride. However, the tale is given additional metaphysical meaning in *Moby-Dick* where Narcissus, seeing his beautiful image in water, is compelled to *understand* it, and, in the attempt to do so, plunges into the water and drowns.

Since, in *Moby-Dick*, "the watery part of the world" represents a key part of the cosmos, and, therefore, a key part of the microcosm, this means that when Narcissus looks into the watery part of the cosmos, he sees himself reflected there. The beauty of our own images reflected back to us from the water torments us to understand our own image reflected there. That means that we are tormented by

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33. Cameron approaches this point when, without, unfortunately, using the word "microcosm," she states that "the central philosophical subject of *Moby-Dick* is … the identity of the self" with "what lies outside the self." [Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981), 2.]

34. Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

this microcosmic fact to embark upon the quest for *self-knowledge* by plunging into the sea. Unfortunately, this quest is destined to fail, for the "phantom" of cosmic life, our life, is "ungraspable." But this quest is not merely ungraspable in the sense it must fail. For the attempt to grasp the elusive phantom of life is so far beyond human capacities that it inevitably results in death. The quest for self-knowledge is tantamount to suicide.

Since, beginning with Socrates, the quest for self-knowledge is a central aim of philosophy,[35] the moral of *Moby-Dick* is that this core *philosophical* project is destined to fail. This philosophical project initiated by Socrates and continued by many other philosophers is not only a prideful "narcissistic" exercise in futile self-love. It is suicidal. Recall that Nietzsche[36] wrote that "Socrates wanted to die." *Moby-Dick* explains why this is no accident. Socrates attempted to "counter the dark appetites with a permanent … daylight of reason."[37] However, this is impossible. The idea that genuine self-knowledge can be achieved in the "daylight of reason" is a fantasy. Since Socrates was destined to fail, and, since that was his distinctive mission, he was destined to give up on life. If one were actually to attempt to do what needs to be done in order to achieve self-knowledge, one would have to plunge into the darkness of one's own depths, symbolized, not by the bright daylight of Socratic rationalism, but by the sea. But this too is beyond human capacities. This is illustrated in *Moby-Dick* by the case of the timid "small black boy" (Chap, 40), Pip, who, having been lost at sea, and drifted alone for several hours before being rescued by chance, was "carried down alive to wondrous depths," where, "among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw … God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and, therefore, his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; …" (Chap. 92). Alone with the ocean for so long, Pip saw things about the wonderous cosmic life that humans are not capable of understanding and, therefore, went mad—although there is a sense in which this madness is in fact a wisdom "too high for man."[38] Pip represents what happens to humans who exceed their proper limitations.[39] Deep knowledge of the nature of the cosmic life is denied to humans (except on penalty of going mad). Jerry Fodor's *The*

35. Christopher Moore, *Socrates and Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

36. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*. *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968), 479.

37. Ibid., 478.

38. The quoted words are borrowed from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* [Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Digireads.com, 2005); Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941)].

39. The fact that Melville puts this heavenly knowledge into a "timid black boy" is one of Melville's ways of illustrating that the "just Spirit of Equality" has "spread one royal mantle of humanity" over all human beings.

Language of Thought[40] is a fine book. But the idea that one might achieve genuine self-knowledge by such products of the bright "daylight of reason" is a fantasy. Can one can achieve such metaphysical knowledge by some other means … poetry perhaps?

Moby-Dick as "Philosophical" Poetry

> *Moby-Dick* is not so much as a book *about* Captain Ahab's quest for a whale as it is an experience *of* that quest. This is only to say what we say of any true poem, that we cannot reduce its essential substance to a subject, that we should not intellectualize and summarize it. … In these terms, *Moby-Dick* seems to be far more of a poem than a novel.
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> Kazin[41]

D. H. Lawrence[42] described *Moby-Dick* as "one of the strangest and most wonderful books ever written" and "the greatest book of the sea ever written." William Faulkner[43] confessed that he wished he had written it himself. Although Melville died largely unrecognized and in relative poverty, *Moby-Dick* is now often seen as "the" great American novel.[44] However, it a very strange novel. For though *Moby-Dick* has a "principle of coherence," it has no plot in the traditional sense.[45] One might think that the principle of coherence is that the various stories told in the book are united by their connection with Captain Ahab's voyage of the *Pequod*. However, the actual battle with Moby-Dick occupies only a few somewhat anti-climactic chapters at the end of the book, and many of the chapters in the book are not essential to the story of that battle. Thus, the true principle of coherence in *Moby-Dick* is not in a plot as such, but in the interiority, which is not merely psychological, but something "metaphysically" deeper (see "The Microcosmic View in *Moby-Dick*" and "The Ungraspable Phantom of Life" above), of the main characters of the book. For though *Moby-Dick* treats of

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40. Jerry Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

41. Alfred Kazin, "Introduction to Moby-Dick," in *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase, 2007), 9.

42. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Reprinted London: Penguin Books, 1923), 168.

43. William Faulkner, "I Wish I Had Written That," *The Chicago Tribune*, 16 July 1927. Reprinted by Harrison Parker, and Hayford Hershel, ed. *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

44. Cornel West, "A Time to Break the Philosophic Silencing of Melville," in *Melville Among the Philosophers*, ed. Cory McCall and Tom Nurmi (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 213ff.

45. Way, *Herman Melville: Moby Dick*, 23.

philosophical issues, it never advances philosophical theses. For example, though Platonism is mentioned several times in the book, one will not find a new thesis about Plato's theory of Forms in it.[46] *Moby-Dick* is philosophical in a sense, but not by providing arguments or theses. Rather, it attempts to produce certain kinds of philosophically illuminating experiences, in much the way that the great philosophical poets, like Wordsworth and Shelley, in their poems, do.[47] That is, such ultimate "metaphysical" truths are only available to human beings, not in the form of demonstrable philosophical theses, but only in the form of flashes of poetic insight in the darkness.

Towards this end, *Moby-Dick* employs the kind of archetypal imagery one finds, not in typical philosophical texts, but in many philosophical poems. In any standard philosophical work, these sorts of archetypal oppositions, beauty-terror, order-chaos, male-female, truth and illusion, and the like (see "Just Call Me Ishmael" above), would be immediately subjected to withering philosophical analysis. What does one mean by "beauty" and "terror"? Why is terror, rather than ugliness, the opposite of beauty? Is this opposition causal or conceptual? What is meant by "order" and "chaos"? Is it not true that "order" and "chaos" are relative terms, that what seems chaotic from one perspective can be seen as orderly from another? Is it so clear that the concepts of male and female are so clearly defined? Are these concepts really mutually exclusive and exhaustive? Might these not reflect power relations that are now viewed as outdated … and so on?

It is entirely fair to raise such questions, but it is important to recognize that *Moby-Dick* is not purporting to make philosophical theses that might be refuted by appeal to other philosophical (or scientific) theses. If, for example, *Moby-Dick* portrays the *Pequod* as largely male and orderly and the sea as largely feminine and chaotic, that does not mean that the literary value of *Moby-Dick* depends on the factual accuracy of this imagery any more than the literary value of *Paradise Lost*[48] depends on the literal truth of the Biblical creation story. Rather, *Moby-Dick* is written within a long literary tradition in which, as in the ancient Babylonian epics, the sea is represented as female, irrational and chaotic, and contrasted with the orderly rational male dominated land. The literary and philosophical value of *Moby-Dick* must be understood against the background of this tradition, even if these archetypal dichotomies are clearly outdated.[49] The "truth," whatever it is, expressed in *Moby-Dick*, is largely *symbolical*, and does not depend on the

46. For a concise readable sketch of Plato's Theory of Forms, see Brickhouse and Smith [Thomas Brickhouse, and Nicholas Smith, *Plato (427—347 B.C.E.)*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [I], §6.b. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2x2p7sK.

47. A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), Chap. V.

48. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003).

49. Since the crew of the *Peaquod* is male, most of the pronouns in *Moby-Dick* and the present paper are male. The feminine comes into the novel primarily *symbolically* in the person of the sea. See notes 16, 50 and 70.

question whether, for example, the female is actually more "irrational" than the male.[50]

In summary, *Moby-Dick* functions more like philosophical poetry than it does like a standard argumentative philosophical text. *Moby-Dick* employs various archetypal dichotomies without requiring that these are factually accurate to reality anymore than any poem is required to be factually accurate to reality. Thus, *Moby-Dick* is philosophical, not in the sense of asserting philosophical theses, but in the sense that it employs classical archetypal dichotomies in order to provoke the reader to see the cosmos and themselves in a new way.

The "Old Quarrel" between Philosophy and Poetry

> Let us further [admit] … that there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry. … [Thus,] if poetry directed to pleasure and imitation have any [good] argument … that they should be in a city with good laws, we should be delighted to receive them back from exile from exile … But it isn't holy to betray what seems to be the truth.
>
> Plato[51]

If *Moby-Dick* is more like a work of poetry than a work of philosophy, and if it purports to express a philosophical perspective, this raises a certain ancient question. Plato saw an "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry because he holds that poetry is not concerned with virtue or truth but with pleasure and imitation (which are inimical to virtue and truth). If poetry can only produce pleasant deceptive imitations of wisdom, and if philosophy is concerned with genuine wisdom and truth, how is philosophical poetry possible?[52]

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50. It is worth noting that though *Moby-Dick* represents the sea as feminine and chaotic, it also reverses the usual evaluation and views the chaotic and irrational more positively as a creative force. That is, *Moby-Dick* agrees with the spirit of Nietzsche's remarks that "truth is a woman" [Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), Preface] and that "one must still have chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star" [Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968), Preface, § 5]. This is a key point of the book. Indeed, Nissim-Sabat argues that many scholars have "repressed" the "maternal, feminine, cosmic" principle in *Moby-Dick*—but that issue must be left for another occasion. [Marilyn Nissim-Sabat, "Melville's Phenomenology of Gender," in *Melville Among the Philosophers*, ed. Cory McCall and Tom Nurmi (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 134.] See notes 17 and 49 above!

51. Plato, *Republic*, 607b-c.

52. The present section follows Griswold's (2016) excellent summary of the basic facts about Plato's account of the "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry. [Charles Griswold, *Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-rhetoric/.]

In his *Ion*,[53] Plato's Socrates argues, roughly, that the poets and rhapsodes (reciters of poetry) do not actually understand what they say, and forces the main character, Ion, a rhapsode, to choose between the claim that poets have a kind of human wisdom or a kind of divine inspiration. Ion chooses the latter. Socrates counters that he himself aspires only to the kind of wisdom available to human beings, which requires consistency, giving reasons, and accuracy to reality. Ion admits that he opts for the view that poets are divinely inspired because it sounds "lovelier," thereby tacitly admitting that his criterion is not truth but pleasure. But if wisdom requires truth, then poetry cannot lay claim to be a species of wisdom.

Plato continues this argument in the *Republic*. In Book II, he is concerned with the role of poets, which he describes as "myth makers" or "makers of tales," in the education of the citizens. His two key points, argued by his character, Socrates, are, first, that the poets are not guided by truth in fashioning their myths, and, second, that false myths, especially learned when one is young and uncritical, can promote bad conduct. For example, the poets often represent the gods in ways that are both false and corrupting. Socrates replies against the poets that "There is no lying poet in a god" (382d9). What is most important to Plato for present purposes is that the poet must not promote the "tragic world view," the view that the cosmos is not structured to reward virtue, because "the tragic world view" that that the unjust are rewarded and the just punished, provides no reason to be just, resulting in more unjust people.

In book III, the argument is specifically directed against the bad effects of *mimetic* poetry, the sort of poetry that involves *imitating* bad or ignoble things. Plato holds that if one imitates something repeatedly since youth, one tends to become like it (395d1-3), e.g., if one imitates weak people, one tends to become weak. A similar objection applies to poets who imitate all things good and bad (like, for example, the mixed cast of characters on the *Pequod*). Plato makes an exception, however, for poets who *only* imitate decent things (398a1-b4).

Book X represents the culmination of the argument because Plato's theory of Forms has by that point been introduced. Since the only things that are completely real and rational are the Forms, the only genuine truth is the truth about the Forms, and since poets only produce images of the imperfect things that participate in the Forms (e.g., images of humans rather than the Form of Humanity), they are three removes from reality and truth (597e3-4, 6-7). In "the Divided Line" in Book VI (509d-511e), images are identified as the least real items in the scale of being and imagination (the domain of poets) is identified the most deficient species of awareness. The poets not only cannot lay claim to wisdom but are the furthest removed from the genuine wisdom of the philosophers. The idea of a philosophical poet appears to be an impossibility.

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53. Plato, *Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major*, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1983).

Plato's argument that poetry is the opposite of truth, however, presupposes his own extreme view of the nature of truth and knowledge grounded in his theory of Forms, and it is safe to say that no living philosophers would defend Plato's extreme realist view of the reality of Forms as he articulated it several thousand years ago. The question, for present purposes, is this: If one can no longer accept Plato's extreme Platonic realism, what becomes of Plato's view that poetry can have no share in truth or wisdom, and what would a genuine alternative to Platonism be like?

In the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche accuses Plato of "standing truth on her head." But if Plato stood truth on its head, then Plato's "Divided Line"[54] (*Rep*. 509d-511e) must also be inverted. In that case, what Plato conceived as the most real, the eternal unchanging world of Forms, is seen by Nietzsche as "the last smoke of an evaporating reality."[55] Similarly, whereas Plato disparaged imagination, and, with that, poetry, Nietzsche[56] identified his *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a new kind of long poem, as his own greatest work. Since Nietzsche inverts Plato's "Divided Line," the things that, for Plato, were furthest from reality and truth, images and imagination, and with that, poetry, become the locus of reality and truth insofar as these are accessible to human beings. But what could that mean?

Heidegger suggests that what most philosophers consider to be truth, the truth of propositions, is not the most basic kind of truth. Referring to the ancient Greek notion of "the kind of truth that flashes out in the word *aletheia*," he develops a notion of truth as an opening of a "clearing, "a "lighting," an "open center" within which things are encountered.[57] This kind of clearing or lighting is something that "happens," for example, in Van Gogh's painting of the peasant's shoes.[58] But how does "truth" "happen"?

> The [Van Gogh painting] that shows the peasants shoes [and] the poem [C. F. Meyer's poem "Roman Fountain"] do not just make manifest what this isolated being as such is—if, indeed, they manifest anything at all; rather, they make unconcealedness as such happen in regard to what is whole.[59]

That is, a work of art, like a poem or painting, lights up the clearing as a "whole" within which particular things like a peasant's shoes are uncovered. This means that in a work of art, a "kind of truth," denoted by the ancient Greek notion

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54. Plato, *Republic*, 509d-511e.

55. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*. *The Portable Nietzsche*, 481.

56. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Water Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 219.

57. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language and Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 50-53.

58. Ibid., 56.

59. Ibid., 56.

of *aletheia*, can "flash out." The poem lights up a clearing within which a whole world, like the "world" of a peasant or of a whaler, is disclosed. Heidegger's idea is that propositional truth, like the proposition that the shoes are wooden, applies to the things illuminated within this clearing, and that it is, therefore, less basic than this more primordial kind of truth. On his view, poetry is not, as Plato thought, as far removed from truth as possible. Rather, poetry can bring about the happening, the "flashing out," of the primal truth, the whole "world," within which particular things are disclosed.

In fact, *Moby-Dick*, using some of the same language as Heidegger, illustrates Heidegger's view almost two hundred years before Heidegger developed these views. Just as the word "wonder" is one of Melville's favorite words in *Moby-Dick*, it is no accident that another of his favorite words is "flashes." Consider the following passage from (Chap. 42), more reminiscent of passages in the Homeric epics than of American literature of Melville's day,

> Most famous in our … Indian traditions is that of the White Steed of the Prairies; … He was the elected Xerxes of vast herds of wild horses, whose pastures in those days were only fenced by the Rocky Mountains and the Alleghanies. … The flashing cascade of his mane, … invested him with housings more resplendent than gold and silver-beaters could have furnished him. A most imperial and archangelical apparition of that unfallen, western world, which to the eyes of the old trappers and hunters revived the glories of those primeval times when Adam walked majestic as a god, bluff-browed and fearless as this mighty steed.

Consider also the passage from Chap. 118,

> Towards evening …, the *Pequod* was torn of her canvas, and bare-poled was left to fight a Typhoon which had struck her directly ahead. When darkness came on, sky and sea roared and split with the thunder, and blazed with the lightning, that showed the disabled masts fluttering … with the rags which the first fury of the tempest had left for its after sport … Starbuck was standing on the quarter-deck; at every flash of the lightning glancing aloft, to see what additional disaster might have befallen the intricate hamper there; …

In the second of these passages Melville describes how a "flash" of lightning literally discloses the dangerous world of the whaling voyage. In the first, the "flashing" cascade of the horse's mane discloses, simultaneously, the "worlds" of the native American "Indians" and the "unfallen" primeval world in the book of Genesis, linked, as these are, by the innocence that preceded "the fall." Borrowing Voltaire's words (see epigraph at the beginning of the present paper), many of the chapters in *Moby-Dick* are brief "flashes of light in the darkness" that momentarily illuminate a world, the primeval "world" of the Native Americans, the world of Genesis before the fall, the surprisingly humane and innocent "world" of Queequeg the cannibal, and so on. Thus, what *Moby-Dick* offers is precisely such

poetic flashes in the darkness of human life that briefly illuminate these various "worlds" within which human beings dwell. It is in this sense that *Moby-Dick* is a work of philosophical poetry. However, *Moby-Dick* also has a very particular conception of its own primordial poetic philosophy.

The Philosophy of the "Landsman" and the Philosophy of the Seafarers

> If I am fond of the sea, and of all that is of the sea's kind, and fondest when it angrily contradicts me; if that delight in searching which drives the sails towards the undiscovered is in me, if a seafarer's delight is in my delight; if ever my jubilation cried, "The coast has vanished, now the chain has fallen from me, the boundless roars around me, far out glisten space and time; be of good cheer old heart!"
>
> Nietzsche[60]

It is pointed out in "Just call me Ishmael" above that *Moby-Dick* employs various interrelated "metaphysical" dichotomies in order to illuminate the "wonder-world" that Ishmael encounters at sea, order-chaos, civilized-uncivilized, beauty-terror, illusion-truth, surface-depth, and the land-sea dichotomy with which frames all the others. Since philosophy begins in wonder, but since the kind of wonder Ishmael pursues is that encountered at sea, not on land, and since the right entry in each of the above dichotomies is associated with the sea, while the left entry in each is associated with the land, Ishmael distinguishes between two fundamentally different species of philosophy, one for the "landsman" and one for the seafarers. Fodor's *The Language of Thought*[61] is a good candidate for the former. For that very rational civilized book seems entirely out of place on the dangerous chaotic "world" of the whaling voyage.

Zarathustra, by contrast, envisages a philosophy of the seafarers that even "delights" in being contradicted, as Ahab and the whole crew of the Pequod eventually were, by Moby-Dick. Ishmael expresses his own version of Zarathustra's seafarer's delight,

> Oh! shipmates! on the starboard hand of every woe, there is a sure delight; and higher the top of that delight, than the bottom of the woe is deep. … Delight is to him—a far, far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self. Delight is to him whose strong arms yet support him, when the ship of this base treacherous world has gone down beneath him. Delight is to him, who gives no quarter in the truth, and kills, burns, and destroys all sin though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges. (Chap. 9).

60. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*, 342.
61. Fodor, *The Language of Thought*.

Ishmael's ethic is also reminiscent of that of Tennyson's Ulysses, who "enjoys life" even as he "suffer'd greatly," who is determined to "follow knowledge like a sinking star beyond the utmost bounds of human thought," who never finds it "too late to seek a newer world." Ulysses' way of being in the world is altogether different from that of the "landsman." Tennyson's Ulysses contrasts his own way of being in the world from that of his own son Telemachus,

> This is my son, mine own Telemachus, …
> Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
> [His] labour, by slow prudence to make mild
> A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
> Subdue them to the useful and the good.
> Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
> Of common duties, decent not to fail
> In offices of tenderness, and pay
> Meet adoration to my household gods,
> When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

Whereas Ulysses craves the danger and freedom of the sea, new worlds to conquer, and transgressing the boundaries of thought, Telemachus, ruled by "common duties," is "prudent," "decent," "soft" and conventionally pious. Telemachus "subdues" the people to the "useful" and the "good," that is, he suppresses their freedom. He would not dare to pursue knowledge beyond the bounds of human thought. Whereas Telemachus, with his emphasis on the "useful," is a utilitarian committed to the "common good," Tennyson's Ulysses' way of being in the world is more akin to the Nietzschean ethic in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.[62]

To be sure, there are differences between Ishamal's and Nietzsche's views. Whereas the latter holds that God is dead,[63] the former "acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven." Despite the fact that Melville himself seems to have retained a belief, though a fluctuating and troubled one, in a kind of God,[64] Ishmael's seafarer's ethic is in many respects similar to Nietzsche's.

The key point for present purposes is that Ishmael's conception of philosophy is quite different from that of a "landsman" like Telemachus. The "landsman's" philosophy is rooted in the decent prudent common logic and ethic of a civilized people. The seafarer's philosophy cultivates exploration, adventure, standing "against the proud gods and commodores of this earth," and even attempts to transgress the bounds of human thought. The difference between the

62. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*; Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*.

63. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*, Preface.

64. Bender, "Moby-Dick, An American Lyrical Novel," 100.

seafarer's and the landsman's two species of philosophy is reflected in the difference between Ulysses' and Telemachus' respective philosophies.

Whitehead's[65] distinction between two different notions of reason in the Western tradition helps to clarify the distinction between these two very different notions of philosophy. The one species of reason traces to Plato and the other to Ulysses. The first is "theoretical" reason understood in abstraction from the animal body, the latter an operation of an animal body in the world. Plato's theoretical reason is a "godlike faculty" that "surveys, judges and understands" the world from above it. Ulysses' reason, by contrast, is involved "in the welter of process,"[66] that is, it is a species of reason that operates in the process of life in the world. As Tennyson's Ulysses puts it,

> Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
> Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
> For ever and forever when I move.

Ulysses' reason discloses his new "wonder-world," not by thinking, but by *action* ("when I move"). Ulysses may not be interested in Fodor's *The Language of Thought*[67] but is not hobbled by the lack. Rather, Ulysses' animal reason opens the archway to "gleaming" new worlds. Plato shares Reason with the Gods, Ulysses with the foxes.[68] The former discloses lifeless abstract essences. The latter discloses "gleaming" new worlds of life via action.[69]

Moby-Dick's view of philosophy is akin to Ulysses' view. Recall that metaphysicians appear in *Moby-Dick* as figures of fun. Indeed, Plato himself might find himself to be a figure of fun were he to be sharing a bed with Quequeeg on the *Pequod*, for the obvious reason that Plato's magnificent philosophical work is of out of place on a whaling voyage. Ishmael even uses some of Ulysses' language to describe his voyage "beyond the utmost bounds of human thought,"

> In the distance, a great white mass lazily rose, and rising higher and higher, and disentangling itself from the azure, at last gleamed before our prow like a snow-slide, new slid from the hills. Thus glistening for a moment, as slowly it subsided, and sank. Then once more arose, and silently gleamed. It seemed not a whale; and yet is this Moby-Dick? thought Daggoo. Again the phantom went down, …[70]

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65. A. N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 9-11.

66. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 9.

67. Fodor, *The Language of Thought*.

68. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 10.

69. It is noteworthy that another of *Moby-Dick's* favorite words is "gleams" (Extracts, Chap's. 8, 41, 44, 59, 66, 70, 119, 128, 139).

70. Recall again that *Moby-Dick* uses the word "glistens" from the ancient Tiamat myths and uses the word "gleams" from Tenneyson's "Ulysses" to describe to describe the

Although this "wondrous phenomenon" of the deep ocean turns out to be a giant squid, not Moby-Dick as the crew had first thought, it is just another manifestation of "the ungraspable phantom of life" that, as stated in Chap. 1, "is the key to it all." For this, ultimately, is the difference between philosophy of the "landsmen" and that of the seafarers. Whereas the former seek the eternal unchanging truths of theoretical reason, the latter must chart a course through the "ungraspable phantom of life." The former discloses its appropriate dimension of the cosmos by advancing philosophical theses and defending them with argument and evidence. But what is the appropriate means for disclosing the ungraspable phantom of life?

Croiset[71] writes that "All the poetry of the Greeks is, in a word, the poetry of life." That is, it is human action, expressed in primordial poetry, that produces the lightning "flashes in the dark" that briefly illuminates (discloses) the "ungraspable phantom of life" before the dark closes in again. If one is also to disclose this ungraspable phantom of life, one requires, with Ulysses and Zarathustra, a seafarer's philosophy. Since, however, in *Moby-Dick*, the sea symbolizes the ungraspable phantom of life, this means that one requires a primordial seafarer's poetry of life—but that is precisely what *Moby-Dick* purports to be.

Moby-Dick is not committed to the view that the philosophy of the "landsman" is worthless or false. Indeed, Ishmael reference to the life of the "landsman" living on Tahiti as a "half known life" (Chap. 58) suggests that the philosophy of the landsman, such as Fodor's *The Language of Thought*,[72] or, perhaps, books like it, may be appropriate for capturing that sunlit rational part of human life. Indeed, Ishmael even advises human beings that it might be wiser to stay on land: "God keep thee! Push not off from that isle [Tahiti], thou canst never return!" (Chap. 57). One is advised to content oneself with Fodor's *The Language of Thought*[73] rather than taking to the sea. The problem is that the landsman's philosophy neglects the other, deeper, half of human life. If one is to look, not just into the rational sunlit half of the cosmos, but into that other deeper half, one must set sail on the much more dangerous chaotic seas of life.

Finally, although *Moby-Dick* refers to the life of the landsman as a "half-known life," it is clear that the book does not really regard to two parts as equal: "two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's" (Chap. 14). The reference to two halves of the world is merely a literary device not to be taken literally. The view that emerges from the pages of *Moby-Dick* is that the two parts of the cosmos are not even close to being equivalent. In *Moby-Dick*, the world of

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sea. See note 14 above! The point here is these words are used to describe the "flashing" out, the uncovering (*aletheia*), of a "whole" world as explained by Heidegger.

71. Maurice Croiset, "The Greek Race and its Genius," in *The Greek Genius and its Influence*, ed. Lane Cooper (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952), 97.

72. Fodor, *The Language of Thought*.

73. Ibid.

the "landsmen" is only, again reverting to Ancient Greek and Babylonian imagery, a speck floating on a wild boundless sea. The fundamental feeling that pervades *Moby-Dick* is that all of our best philosophy, indeed the whole civilized world of the landsman, is merely a bit of ephemeral white foam that exists for a brief moment in the sunlight on the surface of a chaotic boundless sea—a sea of which human beings are, at best, only dimly aware, for an ephemeral moment in a few brief flashes of poetic insight, before that speck of foam disappears forever into the unfathomable depths. The final words of *Moby-Dick* proper, after the entire *Pequod*, with Ahab and his impotent mad vengeance, is dragged down by Moby-Dick into the darkness never to be seen again, are these: "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (Chap. 135).[74] That is the final humbling message taught by *Moby-Dick's* seafarer's philosophy to "the proud gods and commodores of this earth."

Summary

All nature is akin ....
Plato[75,76]

The paper argues that though *Moby-Dick* deals with philosophical issues, it is not a philosophical work in the traditional sense of producing arguments for theses. Rather, inspired by ancient Greek philosophy and ancient Babylonian myths, *Moby-Dick* is a kind of philosophical poetry that seeks to disclose a more primordial kind of philosophical truth. The paper begins with a discussion of the main character and narrator of the book, the "ideal democratic man" and wanderer, Ishmael. Second, the paper explains the microcosmic view, according

74. Melville's language of a "yawning gulf [or abyss]" here conjures Hesiod's description in the *Theogony* of the creation of the cosmos [Andrew Gregory, *Ancient Greek Cosmogony* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2008), 22-23]. However, that language is used here to describe the reverse. For what makes the sea birds scream here is the destruction, not the creation, of a microcosm.

75. Plato, *Meno*, in *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 81d.

76. Compare Plato's remark in the *Meno* with Ulysses remark to Achilles in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (Act III, Scene iii): "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin." Note, however, that Ulysses appears to mean his remark in a very different sense from Plato. Whereas Plato's remark alludes to his microcosmic doctrine, Ulysses seems to mean that one should value the glitter of the specious present rather than the true gold of the past. [William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. David Bevington (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 253.]

to which there is an analogy between all living things on the one hand and the whole cosmos on the other. Thus, the "metaphysical dimension of Ishmael's "democracy," and the most basic value in the whole book, is illustrated by Ishmael's recognition of this microcosmic kinship between all living things and the whole cosmos. Third, the paper explains the "moral" dimension of *Moby-Dick's* microcosmic view, specifically, that genuine human self-knowledge of the sort sought by traditional philosophers is beyond the capacities of human beings and that it is suicidal for human beings to attempt to achieve such self-knowledge. Fourth, the paper argues that *Moby-Dick* is really a kind of philosophical poetry rather than a standard argumentative philosophical work. Fifth, the paper invokes certain Heideggerian ideas about poetry to explain how, in opposition to Plato's view that philosophy and poetry are incompatible, there can be a kind of philosophical poetry of the sort found in *Moby-Dick*. Thus, the "metaphysical" knowledge disclosed in *Moby-Dick* is not embodied in precise theses but in brief primordial poetic flashes of insight. Finally, the paper argues that it is one of the fundamental aims in *Moby-Dick* to distinguish between the safe, civilized, rational philosophy of the "landsman" that corresponds to philosophy normally understood, and the more adventurous dangerous poetic philosophy of the seafarers. In this respect, *Moby-Dick* anticipates some of Nietzsche's views about a new kind of seafarer's philosophy in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* by almost a half century.

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