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What Does Melville See on the Ocean?

Abstract

The article begins with a brief discussion of what the author judges to be an overproduction of publications in literary studies. He offers an explanation of this development and contends that the causes are endemic to the humanities. Two causes of this overproduction are particularly pertinent for his reading of Melville: firstly, the constant change of interpretative paradigms and, secondly, the striving of the humanities to reflect upon the contemporary moment. The departure point of the reading is the spatial turn and the author's contention that this geographical knowledge has failed to address the sea. Elaborating on this contention, the author foregrounds the need for a maritime criticism and proceeds to read Moby Dick by excavating the manner in which Melville represents and thinks of the sea. On the basis of this evidence, the author argues that in Moby Dick, Melville offers a meontological thinking of the sea. Consequentially, the author argues that this meontology has a bearing on the present economic crisis and that it can be used in understanding the latest mutation of money. In the conclusion, the author claims that literary studies can make an important contribution to efforts to cope with the challenges of the present moment.

Keywords: humanities, spatial turn, sea, nothingness, meontology, finance

”I wonder, Flask, whether the world is anchored anywhere; if she is, she swings with an uncommon long cable.” Moby Dick (385)

1. Introductory Remarks

One does not have to be a priori ill-disposed to the study of and the writings on literature to note that both are caught in an inflationary spiral. Overproduction is placing work done in this domain more and more into the hazardous position of irrelevance. Publications in the discipline have

reached a point of saturation and there are no signs of abatement. In his admonishing article “The Research Bust” Mark Bauerlein documents how even the best academic studies of literature are not being attended to; they are not only not read by the general public, but they are not read by people who work in the field either. He gives an explanation: “Because after four decades of mountainous publication, literary studies has reached a saturation point, the cascade of research having exhausted most of the subfields and overwhelmed the capacity of individuals to absorb the annual output.” I am not calling upon Bauerlein because of the percipience or the novelty of his observation. Similar jeremiads can be found in countless appraisals of the present state of the humanities. I mention him because of the concrete example he uses to illustrate this overkill: “After 5,000 studies of Melville since 1960, what can the 5,001st say that will have anything but a microscopic audience of interested readers?” (Bauerlein). The situation since the article was published in 2011 has not changed and the “mountainous publications” have piled up higher and higher. These are admonishing developments and they urge us to be cautious when embarking on a reading of a writer such as Melville. I will begin by offering some thoughts upon why I think inflationary production plagues the study of literature. This will help me to position the present reading and, it is hoped, partially exonerate myself for adding to the overload.

Unlike in the sciences, there is no clearing house in the humanities which sifts the archive and antiquates knowledge which is judged deficient or simply wrong. As will become clear in the course of my argument, my opting for an economic metaphor is not incidental. Expanding on it, we can say that the humanities, by their very nature, owe a debt to the past that can never be settled. Texts of the past and the readings they spawned beckon to us. Surely this is not true of all texts but I begin this reading convinced that it is true of Melville's Moby Dick. Secondly, interpretative paradigms in studying literature are not measured by their truth claims concerning the world. These paradigms are questioned and challenged but hardly any of them are outrightly discarded. They all coexist in our horizon of reading and are activated either by personal inclination or by research exigencies. One opts for a particular paradigm believing that it foregrounds issues that are judged to have been hidden by older paradigms. Those very occlusions become the agenda of new readings. This explains why we have intermittently witnessed the proliferation of disciplinary “turns” in the humanities and the social sciences.

I begin my discussion below with brief remarks on the so-called “spatial turn,” not rehearsing its tenets but focusing upon a space – the space of the sea – which I believe it has not addressed. Another important reason for ever new publications is that scholars within the humanities always harbor a hope that what they are doing has some bearing on the time of their writing. Thus, my reading of Melville has in large part been prompted by the crisis conditions of the present moment. In large part, that reading has been motivated by the conviction that Melville's text can help us shed light on those conditions. Finally, in addition to the causes of the inflation of production that can be said to be immanent to the discipline itself, note must be taken of the institutional imperative which tasks university staff to publish in order to advance professionally. I am not constrained by this imperative. Not constrained by the imperative to legitimate and add to the disciplinary archive, I feel free to overstep disciplinary borders and to even ask whether what we do when doing literature is a bankrupt endeavor sans meaning and import.

2. The Spatial Turn and Its Blind Spot

There is no doubt that the spatial turn, which diagnoses and then works against the prioritization of temporal issues in the humanities and the social sciences, has been a productive ground of research. Evidence abounds to indicate that during the last few decades, it has been on the cutting edge of research projects in various disciplinary fields, including literary studies. It has analyzed the selective mechanism of our epistemologies, historicized it, and argued for a reshuffling of priorities. The centrality of space that has ensued after this realignment has reclaimed marginalized spaces and places, set up spatial agendas of inquiry and problematized spaces that we habitually take for granted.

I will not repeat how I have come to think of the spatial turn. Such a rehearsal would merely contribute to the “bad infinity” of disciplinary self-reproduction.[1] Summarily judged, it can be said that once on the cutting edge of research, today the spatial turn has metamorphosized into another orthodoxy. The reason I return to it here is to address what I see as a paradoxical lacuna in its archive. Namely, although as geographical knowledge it has the material world as its object of study, the spatial turn has been amiss in not giving proper due to the space of the sea and oceans. The paradox of this occlusion stems from the fact that water makes up the greatest part of the

earth's surface. Our puzzlement only grows when we search in vain through spatial turn literature for an explanation. In Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann's collection of essays Spatial Turn: Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften we find a rare reflection on the matter, a remark that succinctly adumbrates some of the topics I will be dealing with in my argument: "the fluid element of water and its intrinsic ungraspability" (84). I proceed by citing a number of observations that relate to this mind-boggling quality of seas and oceans.

In his book Seven Tenths: The Sea and its Thresholds (1992), James Hamilton-Paterson reminds his readers that the sea's baffling of human knowledge is not of recent date:

> *What particularly frightened the Greeks, and therefore the European mind which inherited their philosophical tradition, was the idea of the void. The sea's void, that infinitely dangerous blank beyond known land, was as worrying metaphysically as it was physically. [. . .] The sea was a positive insult to their metaphysics, a naked opposition to it. Not only was the ocean of unknown dimension but it was moving, unstable, in certain circumstances even breaking out of its natural confines. How then could this fluid void be mapped? How did one map an ocean when it was featureless? How did one represent an absence of topography? (68)*

In his article "Orientation as a Paradigm of Maritime Modernity," Ulrich Kinzel notes how that "positive insult" and "naked opposition" has had an afterlife: "In a culture still steeped in both the Christian demonization of the sea and the antique notion of keeping within limits, the ocean signified a marginal reality beyond an horizon that encircled the known, the secure, the civilized and the governable" (qtd. in Klein 28). In the same collection of essays in which Kinzel's appears, Patrizia Muscogiuri returns to the classical and Christian tradition and writes,

> *In so far as it is pure perpetual movement and a formless element, the sea was thought of as chaos undermining the fixity, order and stability built up by rationalist thought – which, as a consequence, were always identified with the land. The binary opposition sea versus land, together with the equation land=order/stability=rationalist thought, can be found, for instance – in a classical and influential writer such as Lucretius – explicitly linked to the metaphor of shipwreck. (qtd. in Klein 204)*

These observations all point to an epistemological frustration humans experience when confronting the watery element. I will show that Melville's Moby Dick registers and thematizes this frustration. However, as the following quote from Hegel's Philosophy of History illustrates, it has to be added that this very frustration can be an incentive to thought:

> *The sea gives us the idea of the indefinite, the unlimited, and the infinite; and in feeling his own infinite in that Infinite, man is stimulated and emboldened to stretch beyond the limited: the sea invites man to conquest, and to piratical plunder, but also to honest gain and commerce. The land, the mere valley-plain attaches him to the soil; it involves him in an infinite multitude of dependencies, but the sea carries him out beyond these limited circles of thought and actions. (90)*

Many of the notions Hegel puts forward here are thematized in Melville's text. Not all of them will be addressed in my analysis, but how the sea carries one beyond “limited circles of thought” definitely prompted me to re-engage Melville and, as I will show, to rethink, amongst other issues, both gain and commerce.[2]

Just as these observations show that the sea cannot be contained by disciplinary knowledge, the spatial turn, which prides itself on its interdisciplinarity, also loses sight of the sea when it attends to phenomena that take place on and near the sea. Studies of the history of ships or of littoral communities illustrate how the space of the sea is synecdochally turned into the places of vessels or of settlements that cling to its edge. Philip E. Steinberg's book The Social Construction of the Ocean (2001) is perhaps the best example of this practice. In it he explores how the sea is distance, a surface, and a provider. Criticizing what he sees as a flaw of legal discourse, he writes that this discourse “implies that the sea is a 'lawless', antithetical 'other' lying outside the rational organization of the world, an external space to be feared, used, crossed, or conquered, but not a space of society” (35). Fully appreciating Steinberg's achievement and how it supplements our terrestrial knowledge, I think it is necessary to recenter the space of the sea, a space which has not and which cannot be appropriated by society. In passing, I add that this is necessary not only regarding the sea but space as such. Namely, the constructivist bias in the study of space, either when it focuses upon human practice in space or when it examines space as the enabling condition of human action or space as the product of human action, has a tendency to

dematerialize and annul space as such. My reading of the space of the sea in Melville posits it as something more than human, something that cannot be reduced to human thought or praxis.

3. Reclaiming the Sea

In the introduction to the collection of essays Water Worlds: Human Goegraphies of the Ocean, Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters enumerate reasons why human geography, a sub-branch of geography from which much of the spatial turn derives, is “landlocked” and assert the need to “start thinking from the water” (4). They note that “the inferior position of the sea is compounded when scholars do not consider it as a material space with its own narrative, but rather employ it as a means to explore other socio-cultural phenomena” (6). Although I myself will conclude with such a gesture and employ Moby Dick for something that is not of the sea, I will do so only after I have shown how the ocean as a material space figures in Melville's novel. My discussion of this material presence corresponds with the effect that results, according to the editors, from the view from the sea:

> *Jettisoning a sedentary metaphysics questions the imposition of clear, stable ontological categories onto the world. In a world of flow, change, and hybridity, products are rather seen as processes that have only temporarily stabilized. Movement and mobility is primary, there is a recognition that 'things' are simply pauses in the process of becoming something else. (11)*

Anticipating my argument, I intend to show how the sea in Moby Dick not only questions but overturns “ontological categories.”

Iain Chambers is another writer who works from the sea. The opening passage of his article “Maritime Criticism and Lessons from the Sea” summarizes what such a position entails and enables. It merits to be quoted in full:

> *Commencing from the sea, rather than the habitual location of land and territory, is clearly to propose a slightly unorthodox style of argument in which unknown factors, critical uncertainty and accompanying historical anxieties are provocatively foregrounded. This choice of perspective has much to do with deliberately seeking to unsettle many of the disciplinary procedures and protocols of the social and human sciences. Opposed to dreams of systematic order and the assurance of*

canonical convictions, what I have chosen to call 'maritime criticism,' sets existing knowledge afloat, not to drown or cancel it, but rather to expose it to unsuspected questions and unauthorized interruptions. (Chambers)

If my use of 'maritime criticism' in the following reading of Melville has merits, then its analysis and argument ought to realize some of the goals that Chambers here sets down. I will show that "maritime criticism" does not only set existing knowledge afloat but brings into ken issues that cannot be settled by any disciplinary protocols. However, if we want to show how this is done in Moby Dick, a more sustained engagement with the sea is necessary than the passing reference to Melville's "terraqueous globe" in Anderson and Peters' introduction (11).

4. Moby Dick as a Sea Novel

Moby Dick is a novel of the sea. Probably it is the best-known example of this genre in world literature and the number of interpretations that have read it as such is overwhelming. However, in the vast majority of cases, these interpretations put it to uses which do not foreground the issue of the sea to the extent that I think it needs to be foregrounded. I will restrict myself to looking at two readings of Moby Dick which exemplify this practice. The first one is by William Spanos who in his book The Errant Art of Moby Dick: The Canon, The Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies makes the following comment:

Melville's insistent descriptions and analyses of the economics, labor relations, and production and consumption processes of whaling make it overwhelmingly clear that whaling is an American capitalist industrial enterprise and the whole ship an American capitalist factory. (206)

I am well aware that by quoting Spanos out of context I do an injustice to his philosophically-informed exploration of Melville. I will return to his reading of Melville, but at this point I draw attention to the fact that the focus of Spanos's reading is not the sea but the ship. The consequences of this focus will be addressed and dealt with below. My other source is Cesare Casarino's Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis (2002). As with Spanos, I will return to Casarino but here note that, according to his study, the "modernist sea narrative," Melville's Moby Dick included, is "a representation-producing machine for the turbulent transitions from

mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism," a "laboratory for the conceptualization of a world system that was increasingly arduous to visualize, the more multiple, interconnected, and global it became." He goes on to write,

> *Many of the works that are predominantly structured around this kind of sea narrative, in fact, will be shown at once to record the old and envision the new: they are constituted by the contradictory desire to register the rapidly disappearing past of preindustrial and mercantile practices and to produce the most advanced forms of representation of the emergent future and its new social relations. (10)*

As in Spanos, Casarino's momentous reading of the novel focuses on the ship and those aboard. Of course there are reasons for this: the atemporality of the sea could not be integrated into the historicity of Casarino's argument nor could its non-humanity speak of human practices and relations.

It is interesting that in explaining the ship, Casarino goes back to Foucault and his idea of heterotopia. Those familiar with the spatial turn know that Foucault's article "Of other spaces" is one of the originary texts of the spatial turn itself and that Foucault there states "the ship is the heterotopia par excellence" (27). Casarino defines heterotopias "as forms of representation that disturb and undermine representation: within such aphasic spaces, the fabular language of representation falters, flounders, encounters the unspeakable, faces the unrepresentable" (15). Casarino puts Foaucault's concept to marvelous use in his reading of Melville. But the readings are focused on the ship and its mates. These ship-based readings develop novel ways of understanding questions "of affiliation, citizenship, economic exchange, mobility, rights, and sovereignty," to cite the enumeration Hester Blum gives of the agenda targeted by reorientations of critical perception in recent decades. I cite Blum because she goes on to ask a question that brings me to the crux of what I hope to do here: "what would happen if we take the ocean's nonhuman scale and depth as a first critical position and principle?" (24). In order to ask that question, we have to leave the confines of the ship and stage an encounter with the sea.

5. Moby Dick and the Sea

In this section I record the lexical evidence from Moby Dick which shows how the text registers the sea. A systematization of that evidence will show that not all of it has equal weight. To begin with, one can point to what I will call neutral representations of the sea such as “watery part of the world” (18),[3] “entire watery circumference” (152), “vacant sea” (230) or the “terraqueous globe” mentioned earlier. That neutrality is modified when Melville writes into his sea references either a positive or a negative description. The first group would include the following adjectives: “pleasant” (247), “golden” (373), “blue” (409). In these instances Melville steers close to clichéd formulations. Adjectives which indicate a negative designation of the sea include the following: “cold malicious” (97), “tormented” (193), “perilous” (194), “demoniac” (194), “savage” (202), “awful” (249), “mad” (391). The appearance of either of these two kinds of adjectives correlates with both the episodes depicted in the narrative and with the consciousness or mood of either a character or the narrator of the novel. A word count of their incidence would definitely prove that neutral descriptions of the sea are rare in Melville and that those evincing a positive description are less frequent than those that indicate a negative, cautionary purchase on the sea. When the sea is thought of by the narrator who, narrating with hindsight, already possesses the tragic knowledge the novel enacts, he cannot accept the sea at its face value. A quote from the novel lends proof to this contention: “these are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger that pants beneath it” (372).

Concerning the manner in which Melville writes about the sea, I attach greater significance to another lexical practice in the novel. I have in mind his use of privative morphemes, both as prefixes and suffixes. Adjectives using privative prefixes are the following: “uncivilized” (152), “unchartered” (155), “unfathomable” (217), “infinite” (369), “unshored” (369), “immeasurable” (378), “unfrequented” (392). The following are the privative suffixes used by Melville: “endless” (95) “limitless” (155), “boundless” (169), “fathomless” (195), “masterless” (224). The two practices co-appear in the phrase “unshored, harborless immensities” (115). Summarily put, the common denominator of these utterances is the enactment of a cognitive lack. That lack is inscribed also in those instances when Melville superimposes a word referring to the terrestrial to signify the sea. Such is the syntagm “watery pastures” (135).

In my mind the most important lexical evidence of this cognitive lack is the neologism "landlessness." By my count it appears in the phrases "the lashed sea's landlessness" (97) and "landless latitude" (202). After its first appearance, Melville repeats it in a statement that deserves more than passing attention: "But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God – so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety" (97). The cognitive privation that is registered by the above examples presupposes a relation between human knowing and the land. It points to the floundering of thought when it is unanchored from its customary points of reference. As Melville puts it, "we know the sea to be an everlasting terra incognita" (224). Using Iain Chamber's formulation, Melville here perceives the sea as something that is "beyond the linguistic act of nomination" (Chambers). The work of the negative in these syntagms questions, to borrow a phrase from Alex Purves, "the narratability of the landscape" (8), if the ocean can be designated, for the sake of simplicity, a landscape. The privative morphemes, both the prefixes and the suffixes, indicate that which exceeds the grasp of available categorical apparatuses. If the sea is, to use Casarino's formulation, the ultimate "insurmountable representational impasse" (24), the morphemes that Melville resorts to in order to express an absence or a negation are ultimately nothingness itself. The landless "highest truth," to paraphrase Melville, is nothingness itself.

I find support for this in "The Ship" chapter when Ishmael is asked by Peleg to take a "peep over the weather-bow" and to report what he sees. This is his response: "'Not much,' I replied – 'nothing but water. . .'" (72). On another level, if Ahab's search for the white whale is viewed as the dramatization of the human will to know, the search repeats the cognitive frustration I have pointed to in my examples and comes to the same "highest truth." The following quote will suffice: "How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond" (140). The possibility that there might be a "naught" behind the phenomenal world is also intimated in the ruminations on whiteness: "Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors" (165). In my opinion Robert Zoellner rightly contended that in Moby Dick there is "an ontological vacancy beneath appearances" (135). As will become clear in due course, even more to the point of my argument is Marc Shell's reading of

chapter ninety-nine, “The Doubloon,” of Moby Dick and his conclusion, “Melville’s numismatic semiology is a biting theory of language and economics in which the ontological status of the world itself is threatened with annihilation” (85).

It was precisely my sense that a vacancy, a nothingness, yawns at the very basis of Melville's narrative that prompted me to go back to Melville. But to cull from Melville's novel evidence of how he sees the ocean and how he brings it into utterance is only a preparatory step for a thinking of the sea in Moby Dick and for asking how that thinking has contemporary pertinence. On the second page of the novel, Melville himself prods the reader to recognize how perception is always already wedded to thought: “as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever” (19). The conclusion Ishmael reaches about images of the sea in older cultures can be applied to the images produced by Moby Dick itself: “It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (20).

6. Thinking the Sea

Both the quote from Zoellner and that from Shell point to philosophically-informed readings of Melville's novel. The novel itself explicitly gestures to philosophical thought when, for instance, Ishmael self-ironizes and calls himself “this sunken-eyed young Platonist” (135) or when philosophers are explicitly named:

> *So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! Throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right. (261)*

In numerous passages, Melville ventures into reflection that exceeds the exigencies of the narrative. Recall Ishmael atop the mast-head losing his identity and taking “the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature” (136). Such passages prove that in addition to epistemological conundrums embodied in Melville's use of privative morphemes, Melville's novel engages ontological questions, questions of meaning and being. Of course the two levels are intertwined and reinforce each other. This is the way I

understand Denis Donoghue's statement that more than Melville's other fiction, Moby Dick “brings out in him the doomed frustrated metaphysician, the man for whom words are never right, never enough” (“Melville Beyond Culture” 365). One way to introduce the next step of my argument is to say that Melville's frustration stems from his apprehension of the “naught” I pointed to above and from his inability to find words to express absence as such.

According to William Spanos, that “naught” is an essential component of Ahab's manic search for the whale. He writes,

> *Ahab reifies the 'errant' temporality – the nothingness – of being, transforms its proliferating difference into Identity, its multiplicity into the One (Monos) in order not simply to understand – to comprehend – its elusive mystery, but to gain mastery over – to 'take hold,' 'to grasp,' (as the etymology of 'comprehend' suggests) its elusive and thus dreadful mystery. (“The Nameless Horror” 129)*

Spanos has indefatigably implemented this Heideggerian reading to Meliville. In a footnote to the cited article, he explains the word “de-struction” in the Heideggerian sense he had been using: “To destroy does not mean to annihilate, but rather to dismantle structure for the sake of releasing that which structure had closed off, concealed, and forgotten in the Western metaphysical tradition” (“The Nameless Horror” 138). Spanos designates what has been concealed and closed off as the “radical temporality of being.” What I am suggesting is that what Melville in Moby Dick opens to, unconceals, and remembers is intimated in the presence of the sea and how what he saw there poses a challenge to metaphysical thought.

At this point I ask the reader to recall Spanos's reading of the ship as a factory and to recognize its Marxian echoes. In addition, I ask him or her to note that Spanos does not gesture to or incorporate Marx in his discussion of nothingness in Melville. To take the other reading of Melville I drew attention to above, neither does Casarino in his reading of Moby-Dick and Marx's Grundrisse make explicit references to nothingness, the “naught” in Melville's text. Although he comes very close to naming it, particularly in his discussion of circulation and money in Marx, Casarino does not make that step. I bring up Marx here because I hold that in the present of my reading, in which much of Marx's analytics seems to miss the mark and in which attempts to “comprehend” that

present are regularly frustrated, the notion of nothingness helps us see Marx's relevance. I will return to this below. Going back to Moby Dick, I am proposing that, instead of working with ontological categories, we name the vacancy in the novel Melville's meontology. In one of the rare discussions of the concept of the term, Ingrid Basso writes that “the Nothing cannot be thought, because when it is thought, it is already determined, this meaning that it is something existing and no longer 'Nothing'. The thought can only think something that is” (Basso 256). I am proposing that the nothing in Melville is the sea and that his privative formulations evince the frustration of thinking what is not if we evince the sea in meontogical terms. However, I am not bringing up the issue to only argue for its heuristic potential in studying Melville. Rather, I believe that a meontological reading of the sea opens a way to incorporate Melville into a non-maritime problematic that puts both Melville and Marx, as Casarino did, in a crisis. My juxtaposing of Melville and Marx does not seek, as Casarino's does, to highlight the crisis endemic to capitalism but to shed light on that endemicity as it works itself out in the present moment.

Such updatings of Moby Dick are common practice. The novel's canonical status owes a great deal to the fact that it has been constantly read and re-read, mined for its anticipatory potential. Pioneering work in American Studies and all the subsequent interventions into its agenda and protocols evince this practice. At numerous points of its continuum, particularly when those working within the discipline have felt the need to address issues of the moment, Moby Dick has been the text that they have turned back to and there found a framework through which to make sense and understand the world around them.

7. Reading Melville Today

Denis Donoghue's article “Moby-Dick After September 11th” is an example of such a practice. Reading it, I recalled Donoghue's lecture “Culture in a Hard Time” at the EAAS 2002 conference in Bordeaux. On that occasion, Donoghue used Moby Dick to depict the changes that American life and policies were undergoing in the wake of September 11. In the article itself, Donoghue explicitly addresses the question: What difference do contexts make in our understanding of the content of a literary work? Following up on this hermeneutical principle, I posit my reading of Moby Dick in a context that is only tangentially connected to the attacks and that I believe has deprioritized

September 11 not only in the American socio-cultural imaginary but also in the global one. Of course I am referring to the financial crisis and its aftermath. I add that just as there is no explicit mention in Moby Dick of terrorism or other themes that have been “excavated” from the novel in the extant archive of readings, one searches in vain through the novel for references to either crisis or finance in the strict sense of the words. However, there is a semantic potential in the novel; to be explicit, there is in the novel the destabilizing potential of that vacuity beneath its phenomenal world that I think has a bearing on our thinking of finance.

At this point, it ought to be clear why I focused upon Spanos and Casarino and why I stated that Marc Shell’s remark in his study The Economy of Literature was to the point of my argument. Namely, all of them read into or from Moby Dick an economic problematic. The first does so when he envisions the ship as a factory, the second when he enmeshes Melville's narrative into Marx's Grundrisse.[4] Marc Shell uses “The Doubloon” chapter in his account of the trajectory of money. I justify my own reading by the fact that none of these readings could have brought into their encounter with Melville the time that has transpired since their publication. Put otherwise: although Casarino uses the phrase “in crisis” in his title and discusses what crisis means, he does so in general terms. The difference in repetition that the latest financial crisis has “unconcealed,” to use Spanos's Heideggerian term, or, put otherwise, the latest manifestation of the crisis-ridden endemicity of capitalism, could not have been a topic in his reading. Although Casarino’s brilliant reading mobilizes a host of theoreticians who work from and yet beyond Marx, he does not, in my opinion, do full justice to the potential of Marx's philosophy. Marc Shell’s “numismatic semiology” falls short of targeting what is at stake in the latest mutation of money.

I will engage the potential Marx’s thought still has in the present crisis-ridden present by a detour through Slavoj Žižek. In his book The Fragile Absolute (2000), Slavoj Žižek asks whether Marxist critique of political economy provides an adequate account of what he calls the process of capitalist globalization, a development that surely finds echoes in Melville. The question that he asks has the same pertinence that it did when the book was published. I quote:

[H]ow do we stand today with regard to the opposition between the standard Marxist analysis of capitalism as a concrete social formation, and those attempts – from Heidegger's to Adorno to Horkheimer's – which view the crazy capitalist dance as self-enhancing productivity as the

expression of a more fundamental transcendental-ontological principle? [. . .] From the standard Marxist standpoint, the search for some transcendental–ontological principle obscures the concrete socioeconomic structure that sustains capitalist productivity; while from the opposite side, the standard Marxist approach does not see how the capitalist excess cannot be accounted for on the ontic level of a particular societal organization. (16-17)

Using Žižek's parameters, one can say that Spanos's factory reading of the ship and Casarino's enmeshment of its activities in the circulation of capital are based on an ontic and an ontological principle, respectively. The question to ask is what happens to these principles when, as I think happened, the factory is eclipsed and the "capitalist excess" has become the norm?

The answer is simple: the principles are simply destabilized. Not only is the ontic level on which Marx's analytic was focused dissolved but also the more fundamental principle that Žižek alludes to is shown to be without foundation. Does this mean that there is nothing in Marx that speaks to the present moment? Of course not. The Croatian philosopher/sociologist Ozren Žunec has provided a reading of Marx's philosophy that I think has a huge heuristic potential. I restrict myself to a number of Žunec's points that have a bearing on my argument. Homologous to my meontological reading of Melville, Žunec explicitly states that Marx developed a "relatively integral, although unsystematic 'meontology' ('not-being')" (271). In that sense, according to Žunec, Marx's thought is radically opposed to the whole tradition of philosophy and ontology which has always focused on Being and not becoming, on the absolute and not the relative. In Marx's philosophy, "capital inverts this traditional relation into its opposite by putting the origin and the end into the movement of its own becoming" (Žunec 280). In my opinion, the crucial insight in Žunec's argument, where he names what others only intuit, reads as follows:

A society which knows the commodity and which appears in "the world of the commodity" does not have any kind of form, nothing stable and differentiated. That society is interminable flow, transformation and change, production and exchange, or – the production, exchange and the "ghostlike object," "form" not of something that is, of whatsoever is determined or of any kind of being, but of what in traditional ontology is opposite to these: of Nothingness itself. (286)

The explosiveness of this naming, of this meontological Marx, can be weighed if we think how it relates to disciplinary knowledge. In his paper "Upon Nothing: Heidegger, Echart and Meontolological Ground," James Sikkema writes,

> *Thinking about the nothing is counter-intuitive to thought and its processes which are inherently about something. It is for this reason that the scientific community dismisses the nothing as a nullity; science studies beings and brings them forth to be analyzed, experimented upon, and used technologically. The nothing is of no use to science and is considered nothing to be concerned about.*

Needless to say, if science dismisses the nothing, so does every political appropriation of Marx. The fact that literature such as Moby Dick not only does not succumb to this proclivity but also names the nothing, is something I will return to in my conclusion.

At this point I note that the meontological reading of capital resonates in various diagnoses of the contemporary moment. This is particularly true of those who argue that in today's capitalism, finance has eclipsed what is commonly referred to as the real economy. It has been shown that the quantity of financial transactions far outstrips the production and circulation of commodities. If the world has gone global, then it has done so primarily in the realm of these opaque transactions. What these transactions rest upon is dubious, to say the least. Elena Esposito, who provides a compelling analysis of them, uses the word that I have focused upon here to designate their workings:

> *The problems that arose when it was described that miscalculations had been made spread unimpeded as a result of lack of confidence in the calculations. If the whole construction is based on risk management, and this management is shown to be unsafe, then there is nothing on which to rely. (174)*

The last phrase, "nothing on which to rely," registers a mutation of money that antedated the financial crisis but that also enabled it. Joseph Vogl argues that the 1970s, more precisely, the dissolution of the Bretton Woods System, was a "a historical watershed, a major discontinuity in

the history of money, a unique process, an unprecedented occurrence, a break with 2500 years of monetary history, in short: the beginning of a new economic era" (107).

8. The Time of Money

Others besides Marc Shell have focused on "The Doubloon" chapter in Moby Dick. Paul Royster argues that the chapter "arrays a multiplicity of meanings around a central sign or text, and the pattern of the different readings illuminates the differences among the observers and suggests the semimagical properties that adhere to the sign of money" (317). Cesare Casarino's comment on money is, as befits money, both more concrete and abstract: "What does it mean of money to say that it is its own symbol? It is to say that it no longer means anything at all. To say such a thing virtually identifies money as an excess of signification, tendentially locates money in a realm beyond representation" (90-91). Such pronouncements on money in Melville need to be juxtaposed with the explosion of writing on money since the outbreak of the financial crisis. Elena Esposito writes,

> *Money is fashionable. It is the central theme of our time, a theme that involves and concerns everyone. One could also say that, in this sense, our time is 'the time of money', a time obsessed with money, seeking to find in its movements a clue to the general sense of society and its evolution. (3)*

I bring up the issue because I find that the meontological reading of Moby Dick echoes in authors who discuss money. An example will suffice.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the performance artist Joseph Beuys staged a number of events whose purpose was to highlight and explore the "nothingness" of money. In 1984, with a number of bankers and economists, he took up the question, "What is Money?" From the publication that resulted from this gathering I quote an observation made by the economist Rainer Willert:

> *'What is Money?' 'Nothing:' there's the only possible answer. But it works. Money works because in our heads, yes, we don't think of it as nothing. And because entire networks of institutions – here I'll mention only banks and the pricing system – emerged from this same falsehood and*

established themselves on its basis, making it their business to hide this nothingness from view. (Beuys 1)

This fundamental lack of substance of the very thing which functions as the ultimate determinant of the present world is disconcerting, to say the least. Therefore, it is only logical that different power regimes hide that nothingness from view. Different institutions and the mechanism of the market are complicit in this strategy. Literary works and the experience and knowledge they provide are not part of that strategy. This is why these domains are not solicited by economic concerns. Literature cautions us that man's economic life is much too serious an affair to be left to economists or suchlike specialists. To expect them to give us an explanation of its complexity, particularly after they let pass under their disciplinary screen its slippery ontology, if not its non-being, is wishful thinking.

9. Conclusion

If the humanities are not to reduplicate the same mistake, they need to open themselves to agendas which they frequently bracket off because they all too frequently stick to their own disciplinary protocols. Returning in my conclusion to the question of the future prospects of literary studies, I can merely field certain suggestions. I return again to Moby Dick, to “The Deck” chapter in which Ahab comes upon the carpenter who has made a coffin but is now making it into something else. Recall his comments:

Art thou not an arrant, all-grasping, intermeddling, monopolizing, heathenish old scamp, to be one day making legs, and the next day coffins to clap them in, and yet again life-buoys out of those same coffins? Thou art as unprincipled as the gods, and as much of a jack-of-all-trades. (395)

I am suggesting that literary studies have to be “unprincipled.” Unlike the sciences, literary studies are not (only) about a well-defined something nor do they bring this something forth to be experimented with and used in technology. It is for this reason that they do not balk at the nothing as a nullity, to paraphrase Sikkema again.

George Pavlich's article “Experiencing Critique” will help me formulate what is at stake here. At one point, he mentions the dilemma at the center of the current elevation of critique. On the one hand, he perceives “an epistemological ethos that champions critique so effusively” that it contests the very tenets of scholarly practices. That ethos needs to be incorporated into our practices. On the other hand, if an epistemological ethos is to survive, he sees disciplines accommodating such a possibility by “disallowing challenges to their foundations.” I think that we should take up and not disallow these challenges, although I do agree with Pavlich that such challenges can possibly lead to results detrimental to humanistic knowledge:

[A]s the privileges of modern disciplinary truth regimes erode, so critique is increasingly assembled around images of system performance. If such developments erode disciplinary critical grammars, they also nurture a new breed of 'critics' – those who speak out in order to enhance, improve and expand the efficient management, or performance, of existing systems. (99)

Obviously, the meontological reading of Melville's sea I presented above cannot be accommodated to this “new breed” whose “critiques are designed less to challenge the founding rationales of systems than to fine-tune, or finesse, the technical elements of given configurations” (Pavlich 99). It is hard for me to imagine how knowledge provided by literary studies can be instrumentalized in this fashion. It is, I think, more than a coincidence that in the next paragraph Pavlich illustrates these two kinds of critique on the example of neo-liberal economists who tackle the problem of what is wrong with certain facets of the existing state of the economy but “conspicuous by [their]absence” are questions that address “the founding rationales of systems” (99). Literary studies ought to work on the articulation of that absence even if they have to overstep the dictates of the discipline to do so.

If they address that absence, if they take cognizance of, for example, the meontological thrust of Marx's thought, these studies will not easily identify with a political platform. In his book, Cesare Casarino explicitly states that he reads Moby-Dick and the Grundrisse as “works of resistance to modernity” (xxi). He adds: “To resist capital is to dare to think its outside, and for both Marx and Melville such an outside makes itself felt on history through the corporeal potentiality of labor, through the crisis-ridden and joyous collective body of potential” (xxi). Yet, how to think both Marx

and Melville if that potentia is in jeopardy or if it has dissipated. More in accord with how I perceive the relation between Melville and Marx is his remark that “the writing of crisis needs to be understood as a writing of resistance to capitalism within capital” (68). In my view, Ahab's fall signifies Melville's knowledge that defeat awaits resistance and that its hubris is destined to be co-opted. This frustration of human agency is implied in Spanos's remarks on the identification of Moby Dick and nothingness. That identification is voiced in the novel in the answer the look-out gives to Ahab's inquiry about what he sees on the ocean: “Nothing, sir”. Frustrated human agency is encapsulated in Ahab's response: “Aye, he's chasing me now! Not I him – that's bad!” (461). Where does such knowledge leave the kind of “arrant” readings of literature that I have practiced above?

It leaves them with a sense that they have to know their limits. It teaches them caution. What they can finally hope for is that the Ahabs who command the ship of state will give an ear to that caution. A few signs point in that direction. I will end with one such sign. In a paper arguing for the need to reform economics education, Jack Reardon contends that such an education would have to incorporate literature into its curriculum: “There is no better primer on the diversity of the human condition than fiction. Properly taught, fiction can explain the myriad forms of behavior and human predicaments as good as, or even better, than any academic discipline” (12). I conclude by voicing the hope that economics, challenged by what it cannot contain, will come to a point when it will feel compelled to undertake such an interdisciplinary networking. I am certain that Melville will hold a place of honor in that new curriculum.

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[1] In my easily accessed 2012 article “Notes on the Spatial Turn,” the reader can find a summary statement concerning my understanding of the spatial turn.

[2]I take the oportunity to draw the reader's attention to a publication in Croatian which resulted from a conference that brought together philosophers and literary scholars to think and discuss the sea. In the book, Melville is offhandedly mentioned as a writer who thematizes the problem of coming to grips with the enigma of the sea (Šegedin and Žunec 103). The English translation of the original title summarizes the issues that were on the agenda during the conference: This side of infinity: philosophizing and the sea.

[3] All of my quotations are from the edition of Moby Dick published in 2002 and edited by Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford.

[4] Such an approach to Melville is not unprecedented. Paul Royster maintains that Moby Dick as no other novel of the nineteenth century, “is so concerned with the actions and relations of the workplace or so committed to describing the process of production” (313). According to him, the novel “grounds its entire system of metaphor in economy” (qtd. in Bercovitch and Jehlen 319).

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