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Literature and the Enigma of Power: A Reading of "Moby-Dick"

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Abstract

This dissertation, which consists in a reading of Herman Melville's novel Moby-Dick, has a double aim: it situates what is at stake in Moby-Dick in the context of the contemporary project of putting into question and rethinking of the traditional status and function of literature and art, a project sometimes referred to under the general label of the 'critique of the aesthetic'. It attempts to show that Moby-Dick's way of raising anew this problem we call literature consists in a complex attempt to isolate and delineate a unique kind of linguistic address---an address that cannot be thought in any of the categories that have characterized the traditional thinking of the literary---the bringing about of which sets the singular task for the literary work. It consists further in an exploration of the event of encounter with this address and of the kind of addressee that it calls for and creates, and in an attempt to perform the coming into being of this unique addressee. ;This contemporary questioning of literature, manifested in the works of such writers as Artaud, Beckett, and Celan and of such theoreticians as Heidegger, Derrida, and Adorno, as well as in recent theoretical projects such as "New Historicism" and "Post-Colonial" studies, has to be understood, I suggest, in the wake of the European disasters and catastrophes of the 20th century. It has to be thought, I claim, in relation to the concept of disaster and as attempting to articulate something, or make something heard, which has hitherto been repressed, or stifled, and which these disasters have released into the

world. ;It is the achievement of Moby-Dick, I argue, to have posed ahead of its time the contemporary literary problem as a thinking of the disaster and to have shown this "something", which cries out to be heard through the disaster, to be a singular and strange address which can be only heard as literature, and which Melville calls "The Whale". It is through the enigmatic figure of the disastrous whale and through the effects that its enigma has upon those who encounter it, or are addressed by it and called upon to respond to it, that Melville allegorizes the literary address. What characterizes this address is a certain excess which overwhelms those who encounter it and which brings about the collapse of its addressee as a subject of knowledge, secure in the meanings it wishes to convey. This event of address calls for a shift from the vocabulary of knowledge to the vocabulary of power in order to describe its action, and creates the addressee as a witness to the address whose task it is to testify to "the whale" which brought about its collapse, to reverberate it into the future, and to open the future through this reverberation

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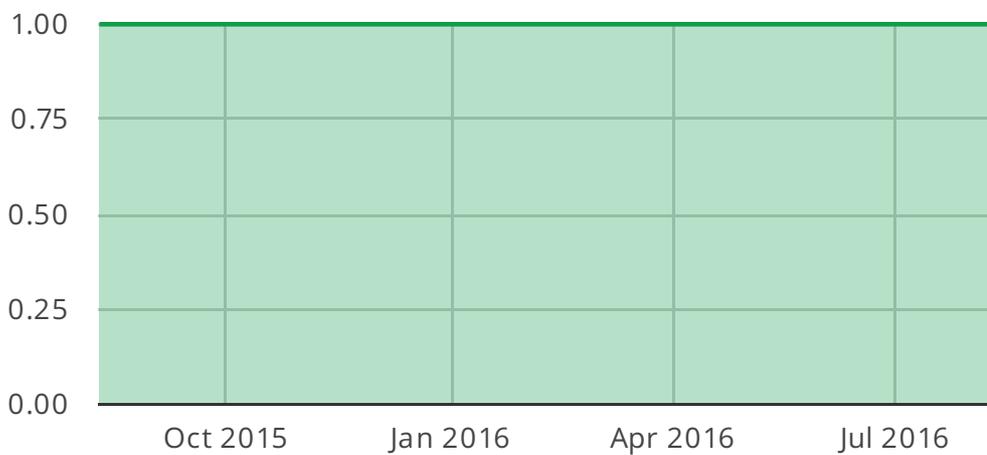
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