

# Herman Melville's Ecological Vision and the Limits of Language

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## Abstract

When Herman Melville began writing, publishing his first work in 1846, he joined an illustrious group of American authors defining American literature. Five years later in 1851, as he wrote what would become his best-known work, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, Melville began working to express a scientific understanding of the world beyond what language would allow. This led to Melville's greatest writing experiment: to write beyond the limitations of language. Through his intimate relationship with the written word and a sustained effort to reproduce in language his ecological philosophy, Melville tried to mold language into an instrument of his will. He strove to represent how humans experience the world but found himself limited by language's capacity for illustration; instead, he would have to write *how* humans experience the world. This "how" is evidenced in the poetics of three of Melville's stories: *Moby-Dick*, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street," and "Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative." In "Billy Budd, Sailor," his final work, published posthumously, Melville successfully frees himself from the "oppressive totality of language" (Delbanco, 1993, p. 5), having evolved his writing past the need for language—something akin to what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger will later call "undergoing an experience with language" (1971, p. 57). To fully grasp the nature of this ultra-linguistic literary feat, this essay analyzes the evolution of Melville's writing styles and poetics through the lenses of scientific, linguistic, and Heideggerian philosophy, in effect understanding Melville's most ambitious undertaking through the discourses that came after him.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Language, Human-Nature, Moby Dick

## 1. *Moby-Dick* and Human-Nature Entanglement

The novel *Moby-Dick* bridges the natural and homocentric spheres by creating an amalgam of the author's observations on the natural world, the human act of attempting to represent it, and the language of the story itself that allows *Moby-Dick* to become a "laboratory of literature" (Hoare, 2013, p. 160). In the words of Dr. Tom Nurmi in his 2020 book *Magnificent Decay: Melville & Ecology*, "Melville understood that our planet is defined by ensembles of emergent complexity crisscrossing borders of life and nonlife, human and nonhuman" (p. xi). In chapter 102 of *Moby-Dick*, titled "A Bower in the Arsacides," the image of a flame within a whale skeleton symbolizes the novel and the ability of language to intertwine the natural sphere with the human. However, as Melville strove to represent this entanglement, he found himself limited by language's capacity for illustration, and instead of writing to show such entanglement to the reader, he would have to write in the same way that such a vision would influence one's perception of the world.

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Now, amid the green, life-restless loom of that Arsacidean wood, the great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging—a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories. (2018, p. 331)

In this passage, Ishmael discovers what Professor Elizabeth Schultz calls a "fusion of human artifice within a natural setting" (2000, p. 111) in her essay "Melville's Environmental Vision in *Moby-Dick*." Schultz posits that because the locals have applied their religious tenets to the natural sphere, here seen in the form of the whale, Melville's description of the skeleton demonstrates the interdependency of humanity and nature. However, in imagining a scientific vision that denotes language as the bridge between these two, the whale's skeleton becomes an even more complex symbol.

The touch of humanity brings the whale back to life. By applying their spiritual ritual to the skeleton, the people of the Arsacides apply new meaning to the whale in death, essentially ensuring that the whale, or at least the spirit of it, lives on through their spirituality. In this instance, the flame connects the natural sphere to the human through the blurring of the line where the whale's legacy ends and the legacy that humanity gave it begins. This sacred flame is a synecdoche for Melville's overall philosophy that the natural and the human spheres that influence and make up our world have become so tightly wound together that one can no longer exist without the other.

Additionally, the flame allows Melville to not only blur the distinctions between human and nature, but also to begin defining the mechanism that does so: language. Ishmael describes the flame as producing an "artificial smoke...so that the mystic head again sent forth its vapory spout" (*Moby-Dick*, 2018, pp. 330-1), demonstrating that the flame has brought forth a representation of the living whale. Following Melville's allusions to Greek mythology in the rest of the novel, one can safely say that the importance of the flame here alludes to Prometheus, the titan who brought the gift of fire to humanity and spurred on the creation of human cultures. Without such human creations, symbolized here in the whale's flame, the whale would simply die with its body and nature would take its course. I posit that Melville considered the most important of humanity's inventions for connecting the human to the non-human to be language, as identified by this flame. The people of the Arsacides have no religion by which to apply meaning to the whale's skeleton without first having language, Ishmael has no framework for understanding the whale without first having language, and Melville has no ability to communicate the world around him without first having language. In fact, Melville even touches upon the idea that the categories of "nature" and "human," as defined by humans, come from language and therefore are merely constructions, and these constructions cannot be overcome without leaving language behind:

...we, too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it...The spoken words that are inaudible among the flying spindles; those same words are plainly heard without the walls, bursting from the opened casements. (2018, p. 331)

In other words, once one is able to extricate themselves from the boundaries, or "walls," of the category of "human," one can use language to describe it, but one must still use language to dissolve the boundaries of such a definition.

This is why Melville's system for understanding the world is difficult to organize, and it is reflected in his language. Melville acknowledges and reflects that difficulty in the style of prose in which he wrote *Moby-Dick*. In fact, Nurmi notes the novel's "famously digressive structure...that has long frustrated readers expecting more familiar contours of narrative fiction," and further explains that readers looking for clean resolution in Melville "are left longing" (2020, p. 3). Melville does not condescend to his readers, but rather asks them to stretch their preconceived notions of the human/non-human dichotomy in order to effectively understand *Moby-Dick*'s narration; each page is filled with difficult passages because Melville's underlying system of understanding the world around him is difficult. The meshing together of the natural and the human through language does not lend well to organization because organization is counter to its core ethos—that the boundaries separating them are dissolved or may have never been there to begin with. We as readers can name each sphere easily enough, but Melville expresses that their actual existence and operation resists and even completely rejects language.

## 2. The Limits of Language

It is out of this tense, undefinable entanglement, that Melville's sustained experiment with language grew. In order to communicate with those still unable to free themselves within the walls of "human," or, essentially, are unable to understand the enmeshedness of the human and the natural spheres, Melville needed to be able to write and communicate in a way that was *beyond* language. According to evolutionary linguistics professor Dr. Salikoko S. Mufwene, "language evolves in response to meet its novel communicative needs, which keep arising from changes in [the] universe of experience or imagination" (2019, p. 370). America in the nineteenth century was a locus of tremendous change due to the Industrial Revolution, westward expansion, incredible scientific and technological advancements, and the American Civil War, so it should come as no surprise that Melville found language insufficient to explain the world as it, and perception of it, grew more and more complex during Melville's lifetime. Mufwene's theory says that the emergence of language was caused by three forces: humans felt a greater need to domesticate their natural ecology, found it necessary to organize themselves socially, and had generated the capacity for more complex thinking (2019, p. 366). The historical moment that Melville found himself in presented similar conditions: "the discontinuities, ruptures, and chaos...of nineteenth century science" (Nurmi, 2020, p. 3) presented Melville with a malleable stage on which to embrace his experiment with language—to bend and push through the boundaries of language to fully realize his concept of human-nature entwinement.

## 3. Language and *Moby-Dick*

First, *Moby-Dick* has the potential to illustrate all three language emergence conditions, but this essay aligns the novel with the need (or desire, perhaps) to domesticate the natural world. Sociologist Dr. John J. Macionis defines technology as "knowledge that people apply to the task of living in a physical environment" (2020, p. 501), and as we consider language to be a system of communicating about experience, language and writing can be included in that definition. In order to domesticate the natural world in which they were beginning to form civilizations, humanity needed to be able to give the things around them names. This relies heavily on the invention of words, and though some languages do not use spoken words, all language systems use some kind of identifying signals that are removed from the thing they represent. These signals have to demonstrate arbitrariness, a defining characteristic of language. Arbitrariness refers to the nature of a language's signals (i.e., words) that are not universally recognizable as what they represent. For example, the letters "s," "u," and "n" do not depict an actual sun and cannot be recognized as representing one by a non-English speaker, therefore the word "sun" is arbitrary and works within the English language system. This is where *Moby-Dick*'s "Extracts" come in.

The "Extracts" is the first section of *Moby-Dick*, following the Table of Contents and preceding chapter 1, that consists of "whatever random allusions to whales [Melville] could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane," seventy-nine allusions in fact, their sources ranging from the Genesis chapter of the Bible to *Darwin's Voyage of a Naturalist* (2018, p. 7). Melville's inclusion of the unique "Extracts" section shows that he wanted to demonstrate the limitations of language, considering that this collection of selections from so many writers ultimately cannot quite close the gap between representation of the whale and the whale itself. Another interpretation is that the "Extracts" do not actually intend to disclose the whale, but instead the ways in which "people have thought and talked about whales" (Delbanco, 1993, p. 6), a discourse which may do a better job of defining the whale than any word can anyway. However, these interpretations involve a separation of the "Extracts" from the main text of *Moby-Dick*. If taken together, readers are confronted with a 403-page-long definition of the whale, with which Melville bends the boundaries of "definition."

With Macionis's description of technology, the Extracts make Melville's conceptualizing of the limitations of language even clearer. The "Extracts" showcase much of human history has been spent trying to describe the whale—to make simpler the complex, as a map would do. To draw up a map of a geographical area without scaling down the drawing would be lunacy, if not impossible and certainly not practical, as defining the whale without scaling down the measurements of perception—visual, aural, physical—would be impossible. All language does this; to domesticate the environment does not mean to tame its physical features but to adapt it to human understanding with the technology of language. To write the whale is not to conquer it, but to understand it. Melville, however, considered this ability to describe but not capture to be a limitation of language, a failing even. Unfortunately for him, it was the best tool at his disposal, and the whole of *Moby-Dick* is an experiment in pushing language to its limits.

The novel-sized "definition of the whale" is not found in the story and narrative content of the novel alone, but also in the poetics of Melville's writing and in the experience of reading it. Professor of American Studies Dr. Andrew Delbanco describes the stylistic choices Melville designed to bring readers as close to the whale as possible:

We are approaching here the symphonic texture of *Moby-Dick*, in which the narrative voice darts back and forth (sometimes within contiguous sentences) between the elevated and the vernacular, or disappears entirely into a choral burst. The sudden shifts of focus and intonation; the illogical ubiquity of Melville's narrators...and above all the refusal of the prose to settle into any steady pattern... (1993, p. 4)

Occasionally veering closer to blank verse than to narrative prose, Melville neglects traditional writing methods and therefore traditional reading methods, breaking up the humanity of the language he uses. That is to say, by refusing to "settle into any steady pattern," Melville's prose does not allow space for the distracted reader; readers must pay close attention to every word in order to follow along. Such an uncomfortable cadence brings the reader out of their preconceived idea of how language

should look and sound and brings them closer to the experience of the non-human, allegorically closer to the whale, and exemplifies how Melville took the “domestication of natural ecology” and transformed it into a writing style.

#### 4. Language and “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Second, the language emergence condition Melville experiments with in “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street” is the desire of humanity to organize themselves socially. This short story tells the fictional tale of a man named Bartleby who works in a law office in New York copying forms by hand. At a seemingly random point in his employment, Bartleby begins to simply deny any requests by his employer, the narrator:

In this very attitude did I sit when I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when without moving from his privacy, Bartleby in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, “I would prefer not to.” I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume. But in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, “I would prefer not to.”

“Prefer not to,” echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. “What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it,” and I thrust it towards him.

“I would prefer not to,” said he. (2016, p. 25)

Melville’s experimentation in “Bartleby” is much more focused than in *Moby-Dick*, influenced by the form of the short story, concentrating on the single verb “prefer” and its semantic power to dismantle the energy and environment of Wall Street. Through Bartleby’s polite not-quite-a-refusal, Melville is able to corrupt the authority of language that helps to create and define human societies: “prefer” creates “an incipient disturbance in the rote world of the lawyer and his scriveners, then becomes an affront, and finally a contagion” (Delbanco, 1993, p. 7). What Melville creates in this story is an opportunity for readers to recognize the power that *we* have given to language. As soon as Bartleby first utters that famous phrase, his employer is forced to remove his professional face of politeness and friendliness and recognize his position of power over his employees. “Prefer,” rather than “no,” reverses the power dynamic between boss and employee, “throw[ing] the burden of action onto the man who has posed the question” (Delbanco, 1993, p. 8). If language needs humanity to have the desire to organize itself socially in order to develop, then Melville draws attention with “Bartleby, the Scrivener” to the ways that language is now organizing humanity.

Following the thread of language as technology, in “Bartleby” Melville pushes language as the technology of social dissent: “I would prefer not to” becomes a literal tool for the dismantling of received structures of power. In fact, following the narrator’s initial shock, he further explains that “has there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner...doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises” (2016, p. 26). Later, after another instance of “I would prefer not to,” the narrator explains that he felt “disarmed” by Bartleby’s responses and “began to reason with him” (2016, p. 27). In this story, Melville, in accordance with his work as an author, demonstrates his belief that language is the most powerful tool available to the meek. Bartleby’s famous phrase stands in as an allegory for literary work in general, and the story showcases the phrase’s power in the face of Wall Street and literature’s power in the face of capitalism as it grew during Melville’s lifetime.

#### 5. Language and “Billy Budd, Sailor”

Third and finally, Melville’s final addition to his oeuvre was published in 1924, thirty-three years after his death, and accomplished the goal of his decades-long experiment with writing and language. “Billy Budd, Sailor” is a novella that chronicles the intersection of the lives of Billy Budd, John Claggart, and Captain Edward Vere. Onboard the HMS *Bellipotent*, Billy unintentionally kills Claggart, and Captain Vere must sentence him to death by hanging despite his knowledge of Billy’s innocence of intent and consequently, he is reluctant to do so. This story not only pushes against the language emergence condition described as humanity having generated the capacity for more complex thinking, “Billy Budd, Sailor” breaks that concept open to a new facet of literary understanding.

Billy Budd had a stutter, or a “liability to a voice defect” (2016, p. 256), and as a result, he rarely spoke and was illiterate. Thus, he did not participate in the language-driven world in which he lived, and merely went about his duties as “everything a sailor should be” (2016, p. 256). It is with the caution and reserve of Billy Budd that Melville finally writes without language. The scene in which Captain Vere delivers Billy’s sentence to him is not narrated. Breaking from the otherwise consistent omniscient third-person narration, the narrator suddenly does not have access to, or perhaps does not want access to, this moment in the story. What should be the penultimate paragraph of chapter 22 is simply not there. Instead, the story continues on:

The first to encounter Captain Vere in act of leaving the compartment was the senior Lieutenant. The face he beheld, for the moment one expressive of the agony of the strong, was to that officer, tho’ a man of fifty, a startling revelation. That the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation was apparently indicated by the former’s exclamation in the scene soon perforce to be touched upon. (2016, p. 312)

The sentencing scene is left out of the novella, however, even though we cannot read it, somehow, in our consciousness as readers, the scene exists—we know, with certainty, what happened. The emotional agony experienced by Captain Vere in

sentencing Billy is not described and yet still communicated to the reader. This is not a simple lack of description however, but rather description beyond description.

As a testament to the mastery of character Melville demonstrates in Budd, Vere, and Claggart, this small, unwritten moment is Melville's biggest success. "Billy Budd" was Melville's final attempt to write without language, it worked, and he was dead before the world read it. The problem is this: had he succeeded in achieving this ultra-linguistic feat until someone read it? The purpose of his lifelong experiment was to share with his readers something that is impossible while still restricted by language, or "the walls, bursting from the opened casement" as he wrote in *Moby-Dick*. Leaving language behind and moving forward without it, however, is impossible without the reader. The scene between those last two paragraphs at the end of chapter 22 is not written, but it also *does not yet exist* without the reader's participation bringing it into existence. That moment is like a direct link from the reader to the mind of Melville, like a wormhole, that cannot exist without both ends of the connection.

## 6. The Experience of Language

To further elucidate this point, in his 1959 work *On the Way to Language*, 68 years after Melville's death, German philosopher Martin Heidegger examines the relation in which we live to the language we speak and what it might mean to "undergo an experience with language" (1971, p. 59). Heidegger posits that such an experience is not found in daily speech when we are using language rather than experiencing it, but rather when we falter that we become close to truly understanding language. He writes:

When we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us. Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being. (1971, p. 56)

For Heidegger, the moments we lack the ability to communicate whatever it is we are thinking, for whatever reason, is when we undergo an experience with language. This is not to say that Melville could not find the words to describe Captain Vere's sentencing of Billy Budd. In fact, Melville's typical style makes his omission of the sentencing scene all the more fascinating—Melville must have left the scene out on purpose in order to lead the reader into an experience with language.

Furthermore, in *The Uses of Literature*, Italian writer Italo Calvino put it like this: "The struggle of literature is in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limits of what can be said; what stirs literature is the call and attraction of what is not in the dictionary" (1980, p. 18). Calvino explains that the goal of all literature is to transcend language—thus Melville's as well. It is easy to understand that the writer's task is to combine words into sentences in order to communicate ideas that single words cannot, but this leaves a question unanswered: why does an entire form built on and with language make it its goal to leave it behind? This is likely an unanswerable question, but Melville's motivation lies in his understanding of the world: not only human or non-human, not only physical or spiritual, but a universe-sized intersection of all of these.

Melville understood deeply how language had begun to organize humanity, and how the categories we had created for "human," "nature," and many more, had become real to us. In 1928, sociologists William and Dorothy Thomas coined the Thomas Theorem, which states that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" ("Thomas Theorem," 2021), and the "Extracts" of *Moby-Dick* represent this as well. The "Extracts" are the consequence of definition; by naming the whale, we gave ourselves ways to discuss the whale as an idea, as the nominative concept, but not as the actual thing—that is beyond our reach with language. But to let go of this kind of definition and the role of language would be to sacrifice power. "Bartleby" illustrates the authority that language carries between us as humans, and *Moby-Dick* showcases its ability to create boundaries where there are none. This kind of power is what led humanity to where it stands today, to our dominance in the environment, and it is difficult to even conceptualize Melville's experiments with this power because our world is built from it.

## 7. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the works of Herman Melville illustrate his immense desire to be free from the "suffocating embrace of language" (Delbanco, 1993, p. 12). Melville may have surpassed the need for language to communicate with and impart his ecological vision to his readers, but it is possible that he also reconciled his contentious relationship with language as well. Near the end of "Billy Budd, Sailor," Melville writes, "truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges" (2016, p. 324). This is to say, that moment of transcendence in "Billy Budd, Sailor," while an incredible accomplishment, would not have been possible without the written story surrounding it and the participation of the reader's imagination. After releasing himself from the confines of language, Melville may have demonstrated that he had also gained a kind of stoic respect for the "ragged edges" of language's power, which are, in essence, its limitations.

For Melville, to release the hold of language is to leave behind the "walls" of human and approach a truer understanding of the intertwining of every part of the world. He demonstrates this in "Billy Budd, Sailor." Because Billy cannot be an active participant in the language of the world around him, perhaps he was the closest a person could be to this truth. Years later, this concept would become a hallmark of modernist poetry, with writers like Wallace Stevens similarly pushing the limits of language in works like "The Man on the Dump." But Melville wrote in the midst of global changes that altered perception of the world and the human's place in it. Melville was in tune with these changes and had developed such a deftness with language that he was able to communicate the changes he saw happening to humanity's perception of themselves without the technical

discourses that would eventually arise decades later. The study of Melville's works continues to thrive, and it remains important, especially during our current age, to examine how he made sense of the massive changes he witnessed. In order to understand our own reactions to the digital revolution, the climate crisis, end-stage capitalism, among other things, we have to be able to communicate about them without the necessary terminology to do so, as such vocabulary may take its time. As Melville was able to use his fictional works to communicate his ecological vision, so too must we be able to use forms and language styles beyond the usual to explain connections between aspects of the world that we cannot yet name. Melville's works continue to be significant because they help us to understand how such global changes intertwine with each other and with ourselves through a kind of Melvillian ecology.

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