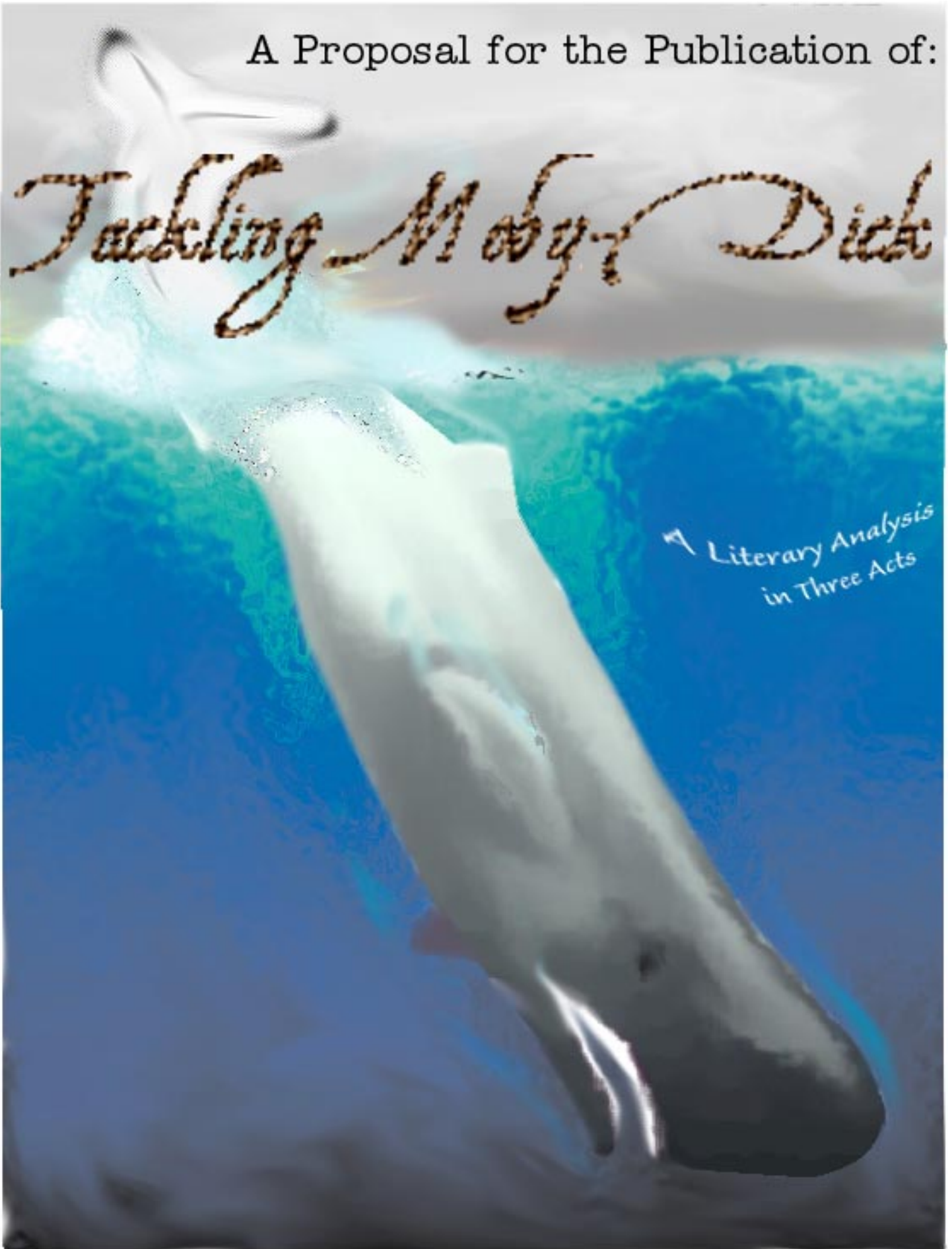


A Proposal for the Publication of:

Tackling Moby-Dick

↳ Literary Analysis
in Three Acts



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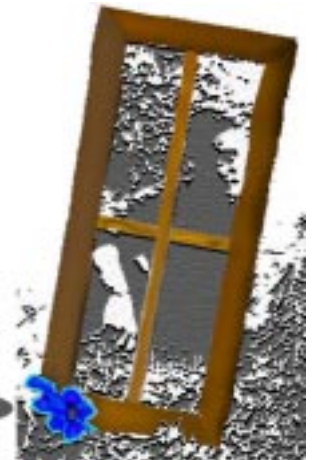
Tackling Moby-Dick:

A Literary Analysis in Three Acts

by

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What's It All About?

To answer this question properly, I feel that I should begin with a confession. *Moby-Dick* gave me a great deal of consternation the first two times that I read it. At first, of course, I felt the thrill that comes with reading a famous and weighty novel; but, as I imagine many readers, new to the book, find, by the time I reached the plotless, seemingly unnecessary chapters about cetology that drag the reader through an inordinate number of exhausting pages (if the reader be unsuspecting), I began to wonder whether Melville had meant anything by it all or if he had thrown the book together haphazardly and let come what meaning as might. After all, for what grand meaning could Herman have possibly found cause to write some chapters in theatrical format and ruminate excessively through others in a plunge toward conclusions that he did not reach?

But, convinced that so many readers before me could not have been so obtuse as to laud the book arbitrarily, I reread the whole thing twice over and discerned much that I had not previously observed (for which reason I spent many post-reading hours wondering if I had been finding substance where none existed merely to keep myself occupied and to justify the wear that I was putting on a perfectly resellable book). A good deal of Melville's style, I believe, has to do with enforcing a pace on the reader. As I suggest in my essay, the length, complexity, and frequent disjointedness of the chapters obviate all but three manners of reading them: within the text, taking the most frivolous puns as having extraordinary import; driftingly, sliding over the slow spots to more active sections; or from outside of the text, with the perspective of a peer to the author.

The conclusion to which I came was that Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* with an amazing amount of control in order to confound readings of all but the last type. Like the whales of the book, dissect the chapters as you will, dig for buried meaning, or attack the content through the form, and you will be thwarted. More specifically, I argue in my paper that frustration with the reception of the novels that he wrote from *Mardi* to *Moby-Dick*, whether it was favorable or not (perhaps those that were well received were all the more frustrating to him), prompted Melville to write a novel that bewildered critics of literature while satirizing all of their efforts to allay their confusion.

This reading, while certainly interesting, would hardly be enough, in my opinion, to make *Moby-Dick* the revered work of American literature that it has become or, for that matter, make my paper worth publishing. Through another reading, with all of my new revelations in place, I discovered what I believe to be Melville's larger message, a message that, as I take it, speaks to an entire philosophy concerning the act of living. Melville was getting at something that he might have thought critics would not be able to understand, and, perhaps, that he understood for himself, but was unable, being a writer (and of dense, highly metaphorical texts, at that), to enact as a state of being: just as one must learn to fly into and out of his text with ever variable perspective, so must one do the same with life — experience it and take it for what it is, but inspect and analyze it only as a means of inventing interest and *only* in as much as you are able to return to good feeling and simple, ingenuous pleasure.

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Strategy

Considering the nature of my thesis, which is, perhaps, based as much on impression as intellectualization, I decided that a standard literary critical format (whatever that might be) would, in many ways, be contrary to the statement that I was trying to make, so I settled on a more fluid progression of ideas. Thus, my declaration of that in which I'm interested slides into a tangential discussion of intentionality in literature, from which I derive four distinct methods of contemplating literature. Then, having snuck into the world of critical debate, taking my cue from Charles Olson's book, *Call Me Ishmael*, I bring in arguments about *Moby-Dick* by comparing books written by two critics, Olson and C.L.R. James, to the literary "styles" of Ishmael and Ahab. James's book leaves me with several questions, one of which, "who is the *god or fate of Moby-Dick?*," allows me, first, to place Melville as a "character" in his own book and, second, to circle back to the beginning of my essay and compare each critical method that I've discussed to a character in the book.



The "Intermissions" that I've placed between each "Act" serve to both delineate the changes in focus and obscure them. With the first falling at the beginning of my character/critic comparisons and the second at the end of my dealings with other criticism, the most substantial organizing principle is divided by the "physical" structure (the order of sections) while imparting a sense of a more customary arrangement (introduction, analysis, conclusion). It is my hope that the effect of this and other strategies is one of expectant surprise: that the reader comes to my final conclusion before I arrive at it and finds my ultimate statement of it to be a confirming surprise.

Statistical Stuff

As you have likely inferred by now, "Tackling *Moby-Dick*" is, for its present stage of development, finished. I would like to preserve, if at all possible, its number of pages of seventy-nine, because the number has some significance. If this is not feasible, however, I am certainly willing to compromise this particular puzzle. Likewise, though I envision "Tackling *Moby-Dick*" as a work set apart on its own, I do have three other essays, ranging from twenty to thirty pages each, that, though more standard in style (to varying degrees), would not seem out of place sharing covers where focus and ideas are concerned.

In the area of illustrations, there are none accumulated à propos to the essay, but it would coincide nicely with my vision of the book were there sketches scattered throughout. Though not necessary, if illustrations are practicable, I would, ideally, like to draw them myself; otherwise, I can arrange for them to be drawn for free, or, more professionally, for a little money.

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Who's It For?

It is likely that the unorthodoxy of my style and my lack of renown in the field will restrain the enthusiasm of readers for whom those qualities are of primary importance, but the very same characteristics can't help but attract students and more free-spirited intellectuals. Given the combination of my slightly irreverent style and the centrality of the arguments that I present in literary criticism, I believe that "Tackling *Moby-Dick*" may find a place as a tool through which teachers can integrate the reading of a complicated, yet classic, novel and an important literary debate in their classes.

The academic possibilities of my essay, though they would be indispensable to any success that it might find, do not necessarily set the boundaries of its arena, because I wrote it with the hopes that it would be able to stand on its own as a work to be read for its own merits. Through the less customary aspects of "Tackling *Moby-Dick*," I attempted to weave layers of subtext and metaphor into and around my axial subject.

About the Author

I finished my undergraduate work belatedly in 1999 after several years spent working in the commercial fishing industry, graduating from the University of Rhode Island with "Highest Honors," as they call it there, and working my way into comfortable positions among faculty with whom I came in contact either as a student or an employee. Having entered the working world for the time being, I've had the perplexity and thrill of re-proving myself, and am enjoying my work, though I often feel the itch, much to the chagrin of my friends, wife, and in-laws (though not my own father), to make up for the classroom arguing to which I've become accustomed.

I am currently working as a Copywriter/Graphic Designer for the Creative Services department of Lightolier, an industrial lighting fixture company. I have also been seeking publication of poetry, nonfiction, short stories, and, obviously, literary criticism, and have recently completed my first novel, *A Whispering Through the Branches*. It is highly likely, barring inexplicable success, that I will return to my education in the future to acquire a Ph.D. in Literature/English en route to a professorial career.

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“URI junior learns about sustaining the landscape”
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East Greenwich Magazine — November 1998. Pg. 36.

“New wave of learning in coastal studies crests at the University of Rhode Island”
Providence Journal — 1998, Special Edition, RIAAO. Pg. 12–13.
University Pacer — Sept/Oct, 1998. Vol. 16, No. 1, Pg. 7.
Narragansett Times — Friday, July 31, 1998. Vol. 136, No. 11F, Pg. 2-A.

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Block Island Times — Saturday, October 3, 1998. Vol. XXVIII, No. 40, Pg. 16.

“Two area URI students experience coastal learning”
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“URI grad student factors salmon into her career equation”
Cranston Herald — Thursday, September 3, 1998. Vol. 76, No. 17, Pg. 10.

Web Pages

“Timshel Arts”
<http://www.timshelarts.com> (and related pages)

“Partnership for the Coastal Environment”
<http://www.edc.uri.edu/pce> (and related pages)

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Essay Prologue

Tackling *Moby-Dick*

“What?” you exclaim, “you intend to tackle *Moby-Dick*?”

“Nay,” say I, “for too expansive is the competition.” And far greater pens than mine have broached the subject. Surely have gold-plated fountain pens and peacock-plumed quills spread their splotches smartly on the spelling of that infamous whale. What hope have I, writing as I do with whatever random ball-point (or even pencil) falls most conveniently into my grasp? No, I will attempt no tackling for tackling implies a reel, and I lack rig or moral. Nor have I the balance for such confused spinning. But, more-over, I find the illusory to be much more comfortable an intrigue. Yet, or perhaps (depending upon which perspective you’re following), yea, I believe my claim to a word or two on the topic at hand to be no less deserving of attention for all my varied casts. Even so, with the mildest of interests in modesty, I will content myself with just a lowering. My desire is merely to take a look: an investigation for which I have been commissioned by that highest of patrons: Fate. I have been called. Rather, invited. Let me take a moment to tell you the story; for while only time issues merit, perhaps still may you understand.

When I was but a lad of sixteen, and there were those amongst my crew who had not just license but autonomy as well, we found our way to Hoboken, NJ, a city which resembled, if not in landscape or architecture then in sentiment, New Bedford, MA. Much like Ishmael, we would then cross a relatively short expanse of water to an island colony. The minor differences being, of course, that he took a ferry over salt water to Nantucket, and we took a train under [debatably] fresh water to New York. But verily, our paths were very similar in direction, not necessarily by the points of the compass (to be honest I don’t know the bearing of either heading), but by intent: each drawn away from the mainland in a quest for new experiences.

Now, were reality not such an expertly allegorical author, I would be compelled to change fact to historical fiction; but true names are ever the most appropriate, and across from the Blue Note in Greenwich Village swings a small sign resembling a cauldron (or, appropriately, a black pot). Under this sign and through two doors we found our premier watering-hole: the Kettle of Fish. If you should visit this historical site, over head you may notice several dozen large baseballs, all scribbled upon by patrons. Look closely if you wish and you shall come across at least three on which my name is sloppily scrawled.¹ It was here, after a game of darts and a group wailing of “Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da,” that I flopped down in a random seat only to be greeted by an exclaimed, “Thou!” Startled, I turned to my left to find myself face to face with an odd, pock-faced and shabby, old man glaring at me with a precognitive sort of consternation.

¹ I offer this tid-bit only for those who would doubt my veracity and desire proof.

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“Seek the Leviathan!” he shouted. This quotation, as it appears here, being the result of many hours spread across the years of reflection, I am now able to decipher for you his *true* words, but, at the time, between his slight accent and my slight discombobulation, I misunderstood.

I looked at my watch, it was 12:52 am, and even with the relatively light traffic, I thought there was very little chance this man would be able to make it to either the Laguardia or the Newark airport for a ‘red-eye at one.’ “If you mean to catch a plane,” I informed him, “I don’t think you’re going to make it.”

At this the old hermit swung his body up until he loomed over me and his knees knocked at the edge of my chair. “Seek the Leviathan!” he shouted again and gesticulated wildly toward the floor, “o’er there ere long thy go.”

“Look here,” I said, jumping to my feet, “I’ll not sit idly and listen to your gibberish! You may do what you like, but I see no reason to escort you to the airport, nor will I pay your cab fare!”

He kicked over the chair upon which I had been sitting, and, oddly, looked much relieved as he sat down and began rubbing his right foot. He then stood, shot me a nasty glare, and hobbled out of the bar. Looking back, it is the memory of that obviously prosthetic limp that now clarifies for me the entire encounter. Yes, dear reader, six years ago, Fate sent me a messenger. Pity for both him and me that I was too young and the night was not young enough for me to understand his message.

Sample Section

Realists and Idealists

I realize that by now, if your crown is not reeling with theories of your own, then at the very least your eyes must be tiring from the reading of such heady concepts. So here I’ll be as brief as possible. After all, it is not my desire to either conform to nor refute the points made by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in their essay, “Against Theory”; but to look at an incidental schism that arises there-in. The “theory” that they are against is “the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general.” (723). According to them, the problem is that “critical theory” requires an “[imagining] that these problems are real. In fact, [they claim that] such problems only seem real — and theory itself only seems possible or relevant — when theorists fail to recognize the fundamental inseparability of the elements involved.” (724). For example, they take the intentions of the author and the meaning of the text to be one and the same, and so dispute the idea that “all literary interpretation ‘must stress a reconstruction of the author’s aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for construing the meaning of his text.’”² Along the same lines, they

² Page 725. The interior quote is from “Validity in Interpretation” by E.D. Hirsch.

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presume that were you to remove the author from the text, the random conglomeration of words which remains, or waves of sand molded to look like words by the ocean,³ are not even language at all in that they have no meaning particular to them. Words, then, are merely sequential slashes unless there is some conscious motivation to the sequence.

Like meaning and intention, so too are belief and knowledge inseparable. They believe that “knowledge and true belief are the same” (738). In other words, if you know a belief to be correct, then you will believe it, or if you *believe* something to be true, you will undoubtedly find yourself correct in your assumption. The result of this type of inquiry, “a belief about the nature of beliefs, is inconsequential because it merely tells you what beliefs are, not whether they are true or false in particular or in general.” (740). What’s more, and more poetically stated, “the only relevant truth about belief is that you can’t go outside it and, far from being unlivable, this is a truth that you can’t help but live.” (741). Ultimately, they conclude that “theory is not just another name for practice. It is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without.” (742). With a nod to this grand appeal to the masses, and ignoring the fact that they are disallowing theoretical interpretation through their stand-offish theoretical standpoint, let’s move on to what interests me in this essay.

To illustrate their argument, K&M break theorists into two extreme groups: the realists and idealists (they give a ton of these-and-thems, but the categorizing of them all together is my insightful inference). To borrow, in a modified form, a technique used by John Barth:⁴

“Some theorists have sought to ground the reading of literary texts in methods designed to guarantee the objectivity and validity of interpretations.

“Some theorists have claimed that valid interpretations can only be obtained through an appeal to authorial intentions.

“A realist thinks that theory allows us to stand outside our beliefs in a neutral encounter with the objects of interpretation;

“For the realist, the object exists independent of beliefs, and knowledge requires that we shed our beliefs in a disinterested quest for the object.

Others, impressed by the inability of such procedures to produce agreement among interpreters, have translated that failure into an alternative mode of theory that denies the possibility of correct interpretations.”⁵

This assumption is shared by theorists who, denying the possibility of recovering authorial intentions, also deny the possibility of valid interpretations.” (724)

an idealist thinks that theory allows us to stand outside our beliefs in a neutral encounter with our beliefs themselves.” (739)

For the idealist, who insists that we can never shed our beliefs, knowledge means recognizing the role of beliefs play in *constituting* their objects.” (740)

Regarding the poem created in the sand,

“you will either be ascribing these marks to some agent capable of intentions,

or you will count them as nonintentional effects of mechanical process.” (728)

³ They give this particular example quite a bit of lip-service on page 727.

⁴ On page 172 of *The Floating Opera*. I’ve no evidence that he was the originator of this “two voice... stylistic trick,” as he calls it, but then, I’ve no evidence that he wasn’t.

⁵ Page 723 of “Against Theory.”

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Positive theorists, or maybe we can call them the optimists, want “to base interpretation on a direct encounter with its object, an encounter undistorted by the influence of the interpreter’s particular beliefs.” (737). One such interpreter, according to K&M, Stanley Fish, maintains “that beliefs cannot be grounded in some deeper condition of knowledge,” but, “that this impossibility does not in any way weaken their claims to be true.” (738). They then state that, having supposed it possible to not have any pesky biases, Fish’s decision is to believe in “beliefless knowledge”(741). I must admit that were this possible, it does not seem at all human. On the other hand (or not), having had cause to become acquainted with several lawyers, I’ve found several who can *know* for a fact (for to know certain facts about something is the only way to prove it) the guilt or innocence of their clients, depending upon their commissioned opinions, but who don’t necessarily *believe* it in the slightest.

On the non-theoretical side, or the pessimistic one, K&M position P.D. Juhl, who “thinks that one *can* interpret the random marks, though only in the somewhat specialized sense in which we might be said to interpret a sentence when we explain its meaning to a foreigner, by explaining to him what the individual words mean, how they function in the sentence, and thus how the sentence could be used or what it *could* be used to express or convey.” (732). Thus is theory validated by allowing the critic to apply meaning, much as another such champion of this self-absorbed argument, Paul de Man, suggests by stating that “language consists of inherently meaningless sounds to which one adds meanings — in other words, that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary,”⁶ and, “all imputations of meaning are equally groundless” (735). While this seems to me to allow *anyone* to apply *any* meaning to *any* text, the non-theorist isn’t concerned with “*how* to interpret, but *whether* to interpret” (736): perhaps depending upon the difficulty of converting a given text’s dogma to his or her own.

So here we find those who think that they are the prophets interpreting the truth of some greater god, and others who consider themselves the oracles of their own intention: as related by a bipartisan refutation of both. Who is the wisest? At this point I have no opinion, but a young, reputable, and well-informed owl suggested to me that there may have been ulterior motives to this rampant messianism, so I must allow for the contingency that all parties involved are, in reality, nuts.

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⁶ Page 734. This paraphrasing is K&M’s.

