

review

Whale! by K.L. Evans
(University of Minnesota Press:
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book

by Leigh Clemons

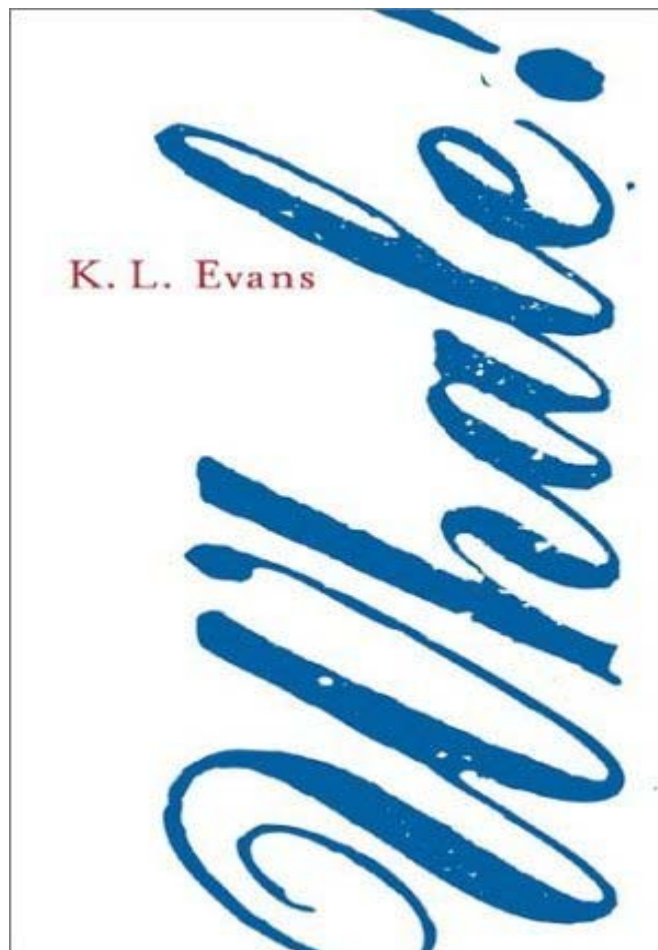
Editor's note: The subject of this book may seem tangential to the subject of New Media practice. I chose to review this book as it takes a unique look at the relationship between 'readings' of theory and its subject. In many ways, Whale! relates to concerns that New Media practitioners wrestle with, such as metastructures of subjects, objects, practice, and theory. Another text in this issue that addresses this topic is Andruid Kerne's "The Practice of Metadisciplinarity." Enjoy.

What happens when you combine the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein with *Moby Dick*? The result is *Whale!*, a poetic, intense, and complex reading of Herman Melville's famous tale of obsession and fate by K.L. Evans, an assistant professor of

For it is the whale, not *Moby Dick*, but the phenomenon of "whale" itself, that drives Ahab's quest and Evans's narrative.

English at the University of Redlands. While *Whale!* does not require its readers to have a complete understanding of either Wittgenstein or Melville, some familiarity with the work of each can enhance their understanding of the narrative. Evans twists and turns through meditations on language (Wittgenstein), the metaphorical relationship between the characters of Ahab and Starbuck (Melville), and the true relationship between the public and private selves, the seen and unseen, the spoken and the unutterable texts that define who we (and others) are. Do not expect, however, that familiarity with the works of either author will get you through on its own. Evans constructs her narrative as a complex series of layers that must be peeled away one at a time. This peeling is the point of the text; there is no ultimate message about what *Moby Dick* (or Wittgenstein, for that matter) "means."

Evans believes that Melville's book is "a tale of attachment, disguised as vengeance, about the search for connection, camouflaged to resemble estrangement." (p. 2) Ahab is struggling to find the "world lost," a task that needs public validation in order to have meaning. Rather than delving deeper into the character of Ahab, says Evans, we need to "test his leads by treating the expression of his desire as that which directs readerly attention to the site of commotion -- to the whale." (p.



xiii) For it is the whale, not *Moby Dick*, but the phenomenon of "whale" itself, that drives Ahab's quest and Evans' narrative. The two interconnect with one another in a way that foregrounds the very search for attachment / connection in the working of philosophy that Evans considers as central to understanding Melville's text.

Evans' use of Wittgenstein's ideas to explicate *Moby Dick* is masterful. It is obvious that she grasps the philosopher's understanding of language's limits in express anything at all. She argues that the use of the word "whale" to describe the phenomenon of "whale" to another person creates "an abyss between my meaning and your understanding of it, or the order and its execution." (p. 54) This leads to an almost tongue-in-cheek discussion of the gap between two people's understanding of what "whale" means, referencing a similar example given by Wittgenstein, a reading of the word "slab!" She carries this issue through her discussion of Ahab's relationship with *Moby Dick*, Starbuck, his crew, and his ship. It is sometimes difficult to tell when she is examining *Moby Dick* as book as opposed to *Moby Dick* as philosophical concept.

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Occasionally, Evans makes a comment about the book's narrative that seems out-of-place in the larger philosophical discussion. Given the complexity of the material she is handling, however, she does an excellent job of blending the two texts into a larger picture, one that challenges the reader to dig deeper into the way in which Melville's language functions under the gaze of Wittgenstein's theories.

It is hard to believe that Evans is not aware of the humorous effect of her word play on "the politics of whale," as she puts it, but her ultimate goal is a serious one: to show philosophy's inherent difficulties to express itself in a manner that clearly explicates what it is saying. As she puts it, "the debate about conviction really boils down to whether a philosopher should mean what he says -- or whether meaning what he says excludes him from the ranks of philosophy." (p. 61) In effect, Evans creates her own language and then raises questions about how this language, and the work of philosophers in general, functions in today's society, and whether or not philosophy has an ethical mandate to either find ways of actually communicating its ideas or destroy itself because it cannot articulate itself.

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In the end, Wittgenstein's famous quote, "philosophy is a leaky boat that must be repaired while at sea," may apply best to *Whale!* (and is found within the book). For what *Whale!* attempts is nothing less than a re-vision of the philosophical endeavor itself: its ethical responsibilities, its ability to communicate, and even its relevance. Evans' text serves as a model of one way in which to ask such questions. Let us hope that it is not the last.



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