Report

Melville Society

Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2018

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During the weeks of June 17–30, 2018, I had the pleasure of serving as the Walter E. Bezanson Fellow at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, courtesy of the Melville Society Cultural Project. I went to the Museum with an interest in studying the Robert D. Madison collection of poetry that Melville would have read, as it seemed to be the perfect resource for my dissertation chapter in progress: “Melville’s Thinking Animal and the Conundrum of Classification.” I specifically considered several animal poems from *John Marr and Other Sailors*, including “The Maldive Shark.” I set out to bolster my argument that Melville used nonhuman movements to understand human and nonhuman cognition by exploring his poetic sources. However, like many Fellows before me, I quickly became engrossed in the many rich resources the Whaling Museum has to offer. For a scholar seeking to study the massive creatures at the center of many of Melville’s works, there is no better place to be than the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

My first excursion was a tour of the Museum itself, which is quite impressive. With a collection that spans over 110 years, the Museum is a space in which it is easy to get lost. I spent a lot of time in the entrance to the Museum where visitors can gaze upon four whale skeletons suspended above their heads. The Museum offers several vantage points for these seemingly other-worldly remains. First, there is KOBO (King of the Blue Ocean), a 66-foot skeleton of a juvenile blue whale. The size of KOBO’s skull alone leaves one mesmerized. Then there is Quasimodo, a 37-foot male humpback skeleton and one of the Museum’s residents that has been there longest (since 1936). Finally, and perhaps the most moving sight in the entryway to the Museum, is Reyna and her unborn calf. Reyna, a 49-foot female North Atlantic right whale was accidentally struck and killed while 10 months pregnant. Both skeletons are preserved as if she and her calf were never separated. In the Museum’s “From Pursuit to Preservation” exhibit resides the great sperm whale skeleton, measuring 48 feet. His perfectly preserved teeth and battering-ram of a skull recall the final chapters of *Moby-Dick*. He is unnamed by the Museum, but my imagination quickly found a substitute. Being in a room with these whales was magical. Seeing their bones, it is hard not to recognize the similarities between our species. The bones of their flipper fins are startlingly finger-like, and the way they are suspended in the air makes observers feel as if they are somehow swimming in the air with the cetaceans.

I was lucky enough to have the opportunity also to tour both the Museum’s Reading Room (where I ultimately spent most of my time) and the Melville Society Cultural Project’s Archive. My gracious hosts, Robert K. Wallace, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, and Timothy Marr, were simultaneously hosting me and an NEH Summer Institute for Teachers on “Moby-Dick and the World
of Whaling in the Digital Age.” This conjunction proved to be enormously beneficial to my endeavors as we were all engrossed for two weeks in the world of Melville. Led by the Museum’s wonderful librarian, Mark Procknik, we toured the Museum’s resources together. I found several great works in the Madison collection, my favorite being Allston’s Lectures on Art and Poems, especially his exposition “Form” in which he states, “we cannot think of the human being except as a whole” (emphasis in original 116). Allston’s notion that humans are only comprehensible as a whole propelled my thoughts on Melville’s whales as they relate to human thinking and literary form. Melville invites readers to consider the whale through an intricate interaction of parts, which many of his chapters in Moby-Dick detail (e.g., “Cetology,” “The Blanket,” “The Sperm Whale’s Head,” and “The Tail”). As I skimmed through Allston’s work in the Museum’s reading room, I couldn’t help but return to the skeletons down the hall without recalling Melville’s interest in parceling the whale into intelligible components. Contrary to Allston’s thinking about the human whole, Melville’s thinking about the animal moves by unraveling into individual features, suggesting an alternative to humancentric thinking that comes to life in literary form.

But perhaps the most invigorating survey of the Museum’s resources was our perusal of several nineteenth-century whaling logs and journals. My group was assigned John F. Martin’s Journal of the Lucy Ann Voyage, 1841–44, which became one of my primary sources throughout my stay. I instantly fell in love with Martin’s artistic abilities, for he had drawn a beautiful image for nearly every animal and landscape he encountered: a squid, a flying fish, a porpoise, and several hunt scenes, to name a few of his images. Of particular importance to me was his drawing of a pilot fish, illuminating so much of the animal movement and detail captured in Melville’s poem “The Maldive Shark.” Through these logs and journals, I also came to the realization that many of the seamen in the whaling industry were indeed poets. This conclusion steered my research for the remainder of my stay.

So many whalers are poets, songwriters, and artists attuned to their own movement farther and farther away from home, the movement of the sea, and the movement of the animals that swim around and beneath them. While Moby-Dick provides us with a nineteenth-century glimpse into the complicated relationship between man and whale, the journals and logbooks add a personal dimension to the action that the novel describes. For example, an anonymous writer aboard the ship Elizabeth in 1837 virtually begs the whales to show themselves, exclaiming, “Oh, whales, Sperm Whales! / Come, pray come!” (Miller 151). In contrast, Stephen Cohoon in 1804 writes of a whale who killed his shipmate, Benjamin Hopkins, in “A Song of Whaling”: “A noble
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school of whales appeared / and for us they straight did come.” After singling out one whale, Cohoon writes, “But he [the whale] sent him to his tomb / he stove their Boat in Rage.” Ultimately, Cohoon concludes that the whale is the embodiment of death. It is no surprise that Cohoon equated the whale with death, and such an equation is reiterated by many whalenmen writers. One of the oldest whaling ballads, “The Greenland Whale Fishery,” which appears in many variant forms, describes “the whale being struck and the line paid on, / She gave a flash with her tale, / She capsized the boat and lost five men, / Nor did we catch the whale—brave boys” (Johnson 271).

A theme of movement began to emerge in the journals I encountered, and I became fascinated with the “flurry” (referred to above as the “flash”) of the dying whale. This moment of death links back, in many ways, to the whalenmen’s belief that the whale is a murderous monster. Located in the

Image of pilot fish drawn Saturday, January 29, 1842, from John F. Martin’s *Journal of the Lucy Ann Voyage 1841–44* (KWM 434, New Bedford Whaling Museum). The entry for that day reads: “calm and squally looking. Employed the morning in trying out the Black Fish oil. The two fish yielded about one barrel. In the afternoon the Chief mate struck a large shark which we skin’d and took out his jaw. The Jaw had 4 rows of teeth. The skin is an excellent substitute for sand paper. Today we seen plenty of albacore but caught none. Lat 0°56’. Long.” Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Heinz Swails with the permission of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.
representation of those final, sudden movements before death are centuries of thoughts and feelings about the whale-hunting industry: what it takes to be a brave and successful whaleman, what it takes to be seen as a monster, and what it takes to cope with the scale of death surrounding these men and animals. These are issues that Melville considers in the two chapters of Moby-Dick that mention the whale's flurries, chapter 61: “Stubb Kills A Whale” and chapter 84: “Pitchpoling.”

In “Stubb Kills A Whale,” Ishmael recounts:

And now it is struck; for, starting from his trance into that unspeakable thing called his “flurry,” the monster horribly wallowed in his blood, over-wrapped himself in impenetrable, mad, boiling spray... spasmodically dilating and contracting his spout-hole, with sharp, cracking, agonized respirations. At last, gush after gush of clotted red gore, as if it had been the purple lees of red wine, shot into the frightened air; and falling back again, ran dripping down his motionless flanks into the sea. His heart had burst! (Moby-Dick 286)

Later in “Pitchpoling,” the process that achieves the flurry is described: “Again and again to such gamesome talk, the dexterous dart is repeated, the spear returning to its master like a greyhound held in skilful leash. The agonised whale goes into his flurry; the tow-line is slackened, and the pitchpoler dropping astern, folds his hands, and mutely watches the monster die” (Moby-Dick 369).

The flurries tell not only of the whale's fear but also of the whaleman's. These notions contribute to my overall premise that human thinking moves like that of animals.

Another song I found during my research—“A Whaling Song” from the papers of Captain Charles H. Robbins 1837–97—deepened my understanding of the ways in which human and whale responses can be understood to correspond: “For killing northern whales prepared, / Our nimble boats on board, / With craft and rum, (our chief regard) / And good provisions stored. / We view the monsters of the deep, / Great whales in numerous swarms; / And creatures there, that play and leap / Of strange unusual forms.” These strange and unusual forms recall thinking and modes of cognition that humans cannot quite accurately label, hence, as in Melville's “Pitchpoling,” they “mutely watch as the monster die[s].” While viewing these so-called monsters in their flurry, the whalemen experience a sense of their own mortality and peril, an intuition that I find characteristic of Melville's representations of animals. Melville shows us how our thoughts as readers also engage in a flurry—a surging, rolling, thrashing movement towards comprehension—when we encounter the often monstrous events that occur a-whaling. He encourages us to recognize that human thinking prompts the murder of monsters with whom humans also share an unspeakable, “mutely” acknowledged cognitive awareness of death.
These are some of my thoughts during my inspiring stay in New Bedford. To be surrounded by whaling culture puts Melville’s work into a new perspective. For that opportunity, I am enormously grateful to the Melville Society. I am especially thankful for the warm welcome I received from Robert K. Wallace, Timothy Marr, Jennifer Baker, and Mary K. Bercaw Edwards. I planned my stay in New Bedford to coincide with the NEH Summer Institute for Teachers, and I highly recommend the experience for all future Fellows. I had a wonderful time meeting the middle and high school teachers attending the Institute and talking with them about *Moby-Dick*. I was also privileged to meet John Bryant, a guest speaker at the Institute, who was equally welcoming and eager to discuss my work. I will long remember my conversations at the “Spouter Inn” with John and Tim. Tim’s energy and enthusiasm is unrivaled, and our discussions will certainly make their way into my work. Finally, I am very appreciative of Mark Procknik’s help in navigating the Melville Society Archive and the whaling logbooks and journals. Without his eager assistance, I would still be up there searching. To everyone who assisted me during my stay: I hope to meet again soon and continue our lively discussions.

**Works Cited**


