Report:

Melville Society-Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2022

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Christopher Rice in the New Bedford Whaling Museum, May 2022. Photo courtesy of Christopher Rice.
When Bob Wallace first wrote to me about visiting the Melville Society Archive in the New Bedford Whaling Museum, it was not easy to foresee it being more than two years before I might set foot inside. A few (too many) catastrophes later, and it became no simple feat to envision the same academic purpose I once had amongst the reverberations of much larger events. Suddenly the archive seemed worlds away across a border which was now mostly sealed shut—at least for the purposes of would-be literary scholars. Soon, I found myself retaining the ambiguous honour of being the longest-standing Bezanson fellow: an honorific of belatedness which I happily wear with pride.

I was more than ready to go in spring 2022. With final grades and dissertation work freshly submitted that morning, I hopped in a rental car and made the drive down from Montreal, through the lush, exhilarating old roads of Vermont, towards my New Bedford lodgings, which sat directly across from the “Sawmill” Acushnet River reserve. Here I often returned in the early evenings away, enjoying the trails that threaded through restored wetlands, perhaps even experiencing once or twice something like that temporary “all” feeling on days otherwise spent poring over fragments, maxing out my time in the reading room.

I had come (I recalled) to make use of the Melville Society Archive’s resources on Clarel and Melville’s development as a poet. By the time travel was permitted, I arrived in the archive especially interested in how certain modal patterns or tendencies I had been tracing in Mardi might help illuminate the structure of Clarel. I thought looking at some of the editions of poetry that Melville engaged with during his poetic development could clarify my thinking about the poem’s composition and structure. Yet I also came under no illusions; having read many of the previous fellows’ reports, the common, nearly gothic, experience of the archive seemed to involve this: that whatever one went in for, the archive had other plans. I have my own theory regarding this apparently recurring phenomenon, since it remains unclear whether the space itself exerts this unconscious effect on all who fall within its orbit, or whether Melvilleans as a class possess some unique propensity that thwarts the pursuit of any single-minded endeavor in the face of such vast, rich resources—possibly, however, some Bezanson fellows are just easily distracted.

On my first morning in the archive, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards arrived to greet me. She explained the collection in great detail, got me oriented without delay, and what’s more, made me feel incredibly welcome. I was certainly made to feel more welcome than I deserved for which I remain extremely grateful. We chatted away in the stacks as I loaded up the trolley with anything and
everything that happened to catch my eye. The resultant haul looked more like bottom trawling than angling, but its bulk was visibly composed of heavy boxes packed with Walter Bezanson's papers, with some of Jay Leyda's thrown in, too.

Bezanson's description of the Leyda papers, which he had donated to the archive, is fairly well-known and quite alluring: he describes receiving them at a time when Leyda and his wife Si-Lan Chen appeared to have no other "place" but the "beat up car in which they arrived," referring to the collection of documents as "merely a fragment from his incredibly productive and slightly mysterious life" (Jay Leyda Papers Finding Aid 1). As I sifted through the notes and letters contained in these boxes, I detected at once the energy and vitality instilled throughout Leyda's endeavour. He was constantly in motion, flitting between places and jotting down stray hunches on the back of correspondence as he persistently pursued an unruly array of creative projects that set off in disparate directions. In the midst of so much motion, Leyda steadily, and meticulously, sought out traces of Melville's life, and sought to test the veracity of these findings, for *The Melville Log*. As I continued to read, I became enthralled with Leyda's indefatigable drive to reconstruct Melville's world, which made me more interested in correspondence about Melville during this post-war period when a flurry of activity in Melville studies was taking place.

I was particularly taken with one charming correspondence between Leyda and Alfred Kazin that seemed to reveal something about the way in which Leyda lived and conducted his literary friendships. Kazin expresses his gratitude for Leyda's "regular harvest of letters" (April 5, 1952, Jay Leyda Papers) during an exchange that took place in the spring and summer of 1952 while Leyda had been subletting Kazin's Brooklyn apartment at 91 Pineapple Street. One can plainly perceive through Kazin's letters the manner in which the two men adapted their living arrangements and travel plans on the fly, with Kazin at one point requesting a system whereby Leyda would send his son "very inexpensive little gadgets from time to time" under Kazin's name and Paris address, the costs of which were "to be deducted from the rent"—a plan abandoned shortly thereafter with Kazin's observation that "the little shaver . . . knows what is European and what is not, if you please, and besides, my postal cards and stamps and books seem to give him a kick" (April 5, 1952; May 3, 1952, Jay Leyda Papers).

The Kazin letters are habitually punctuated with the friendly repeated refrain inquiring into Leyda's Emily Dickinson research: "how is Emily?" They also recount Kazin's feelings of loneliness as an American in Paris at a time when he was struggling with writing, which, perhaps with an eye to his
interlocutor, he relates to Melville: “I have the impression that Melville’s Franklin in Paris, and perhaps even Melville himself, were closer to the French a century ago than we are, for all our busy literary exchange” (March 12, 1952, Jay Leyda Papers). Kazin even casually mentions in one instance a potential missed encounter between Leyda and Hannah Arendt, whom he regrets “didn’t know who you were, and is crestfallen that she didn’t invite you in; she and her husband are great Melvilleans” (April 5, 1952, Jay Leyda Papers). Kazin would later title his 1955 collection of literary criticism *The Inmost Bulb* and also write the introduction to the 1956 Riverside edition of *Moby-Dick*. His conversations and engagement with Leyda no doubt contributed to both these endeavours.

If Leyda’s correspondence with Kazin reveals something about his life as lived, then another exchange—which may never have occurred at all—sheds even more light into the way he viewed his research endeavours. After submitting a request for Merrell Davis’s dissertation from the Yale University Library and receiving word back from a librarian that Davis stipulated instructions that Leyda should write first “concerning the use he wishes to make of the dissertation,” Leyda lets loose on the page. In the sarcastic diatribe that follows, he hyperbolically unveils himself, revealing the true villainous motives behind his library request:

Don’t you realize by this time that my whole aim is to destroy your academic and otherwise reputation? To that end I planned to comb your dissertation & rush into print with each of your unpublished finds and all your careful & ingenious conclusions. Yes, and all your juiciest chunks would be thrown at once into the printer’s hands, for the Log will go to press any minute (any blessed minute in 1951) and be in every reader’s hands a week later. This would effectually prevent the printing of your book (if I hurry I can perhaps prevent the contract being signed) for the general aim behind these devilish moves is the prevention of all other works on Melville. I even sneak into libraries and, back on the floor by their Melville shelves, I build little bonfires—into these go all the books about him, & his books too . . . But with your unusually acute psychological observation, you saw through my diabolical scheme (long ago?) and saved your precious work. Foiled again! (Leyda to Davis, undated, Jay Leyda Papers)

What prompted this response? Although the date of the letter is unknown,¹ and it is unclear whether or not it was even sent, it seems that there was activity connecting Leyda and Davis in the Yale library in the fall of 1947, when Leyda receives an apologetic note from a librarian who admits his oversight in the delay of granting Leyda access to certain Melville manuscripts—these do not seem to pertain to the dissertation in question but were letters and primary documents that concerned Davis as well (James T. Babb to Leyda, October

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¹ The date of the letter is unknown.
1, 1947, Jay Leyda Papers). Yet whenever the above letter was written, and whether or not it remained only a private cathartic purgation of his own frustration, Leyda clearly expresses his disregard for protectionist scholarship and the games and rewards of academic prestige. Not just in the spirit of his correspondence, but in the unwieldy and undeniably eccentric form of *The Melville Log* itself, Leyda evinced a more “open-source” approach to Melville that focused on collaborative and collective knowledge. Not infrequently, Leyda enlisted help from fellow Melville scholars, including Bezanson, in tracking down details or transcribing work that was inaccessible to him, often counseling patience for what he self-consciously recognized as his own bad habit of pestering friends with errands.

Reading Leyda helped me to appreciate the extent to which Bezanson participated in similar foundational work, and in another sense, Bezanson's own indefatigable drive. For while Bezanson remarked that there was something slightly mysterious about Leyda's life, surely there is something at least vaguely inscrutable about one who devotes a significant portion of their life to the reclamation and study of a poem like *Clarel*. Bezanson stood out to me as a source of fascination from my first encounter with him. Like many students of Melville, I was familiar with his work almost as early as I was familiar with *Moby-Dick*—the Norton Critical Editions have surely seen to that—and I felt I had lingered over him for an unusually long period of time. His essay, “*Moby-Dick*: Work of Art” (*Moby-Dick Centennial Essays*, ed. Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield [1965], 30–58), for instance, is often so taken for granted that it tends to be perceived as scholarship of “general” rather than specific interest. Yet in just that essay Bezanson taught me to think in narrative terms about consciousness, modal shifts, dreams, and organic form through a sensitive attunement to larger macro patterns within the text—those relationships between chapters, sections, genres, and modes—that possess just as much claim to our attention as the close reading of individual passages.

Despite speaking at length about Leyda, I spent far more of my time in the archive with Bezanson, first reading his dissertation on *Clarel*, and then moving through his correspondence and notes. Bezanson's hand isn't the easiest to decode, but I read letters of exasperation, as he struggled over years to get movement on the publication of the Hendricks House *Clarel*; I read lists and summary notes detailing books on rare birds and travel wonders before he set sail for the Galápagos; I read a much more measured exchange on the sanctioned use of dissertation materials between himself and Newton Arvin; and I read with great interest his drafts and revisions for several landmark essays. It is remarkable how many generations of scholarship Bezanson spans: one of the earliest letters from a young Tyrus Hillway is addressed to Lieutenant Bezanson.
while he still is overseas during World War II; more recent letters were sent by Melvillians whom I have spoken with since (with the mens rea of one who has pilfered their mail).

The real gem of the collection for me, however, was Bezanson’s copy of Moby-Dick: a 1967 Norton with a mailing address, phone number, and desperate plea scrawled in the front cover to return if lost. Bezanson had described Ishmael as the mediating narrative imagination of Moby-Dick through which everything in the text flows; here, the profuse, reflective, and often structural, marginalia of his copy constituted still another “imagination through which all matters of the book pass” (“Moby-Dick: Work of Art,” 36). As I lingered on certain pages, I admired Bezanson’s attentiveness to humour especially in the narrative, along with the way in which he demarcated the work’s “journey through literary modes” as he put it—or scrawled it—on his copy’s title page. Most of all, I appreciated the almost Montaigne-like layers, over years, of his struggle with the text.

Walter Bezanson’s heavily marked 1967 Norton edition of Moby-Dick. Photo courtesy of Christopher Rice.
I wish to thank everyone from the Melville Society Cultural Project for being exceptionally considerate throughout the long process of getting to New Bedford. Thank you as well to the friendly and accommodating staff at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, especially Librarian Mark Procknik who was invariably able to assist me with anything I needed. A special thanks also to Mary K, who visited, and invited me to Mystic Seaport Museum for a behind-the-scenes Melville-edition tour of the 1841 whaleship Charles W. Morgan. Not only was I able to get some sun on a Mystic River cruise around the Museum, but I was able to cool off in the Planetarium, where I caught a short presentation on Polynesian astronomy and celestial navigation techniques, which might just come in handy if I ever abandon ship in the Pacific.

During my stay, I became a loyal patron of Dee’s Hot Dogs, Ma’s Donuts, and The Clam Shack on the waterfront—however I remain filled with regret for having missed my chance to try stuffed quahogs at the Riverside Pub. I will be back. As I plotted my return course to Montreal, I took a small detour to Worcester to pay my respects to minor league baseball and the team that was once the Pawtucket Paw Sox. While trying to find parking, I managed to accidently back into the bumper of a car behind me, and, although there was no damage, when I went to find my seat in the stadium, I discovered to my surprise that I was seated directly beside the couple I had just met so uncronomoniously on the road. It was a slightly awkward start, but we were all laughing by the second inning—reminding me, on my way back, that it is well to be on friendly terms, where possible, with all inmates of the place one lodges in.

Notes

1 It is nothing more than speculation on my part, but if the letter was written sometime in 1947 in the midst of other Yale University Library activity, then Leyda’s exasperated description of the Log’s publication “any blessed minute in 1951” would be read sarcastically and self-denigratingly as setting the date far off from the time of composition (it also happens to be the correct year of publication). Moreover, it could be that Leyda had been feeling particularly sensitive in 1947 about accusations regarding his use of scholarly materials after being admonished by Henry Murray for his accessing a trove of Melville documents through Agnes Morewood that Murray had been sitting on for some time and intending to use for his own eventual Melville biography, which never materialized.