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Report

Melville Society Archive Fellowship

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Melville Society Archive Fellow Peter Riley in the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library. *Photo courtesy of Kate Mello.*

The Melville Society Archive Fellowship, comprising a \$500 stipend, a two-week stay in the scholars' quarters at the Research Library of the New Bedford Whaling Museum, a chance to read the whole of *Moby-Dick* in 25 hours—and so much more—is a really fantastic opportunity for

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post-graduate researchers interested in all things Herman. I have just returned with a head full of ideas.

This growing archive—a previously unknown collection of Jay Leyda’s papers was added while I was there—contains a large and pleasing selection of materials; I only just scratched the surface. The Madison collection of Melville’s poetry library is magnificent, consisting of editions of the volumes we know Melville either owned or borrowed. To be able to pick and choose from this bibliographic trove is to gain a special insight into how the poet cultivated his formal and stylistic peculiarities. What is fascinating about this set of books is how they point beyond themselves. Yes, Melville read and assimilated the sanitized tetrameters of Browning, Scott, and Byron, but he was also clearly fascinated by more ephemeral versifying. His collections of song-lyrics and ballads gesture to experience beyond the bookshelf—the sea-shanties and work songs he heard and sang on deck as a young sailor, the tunes he heard on his travels to the Holy Land. The often ugly corporeality of Melville’s lines correlates with a poetry collection that continually slides away from the Canon.

I also had a leaf through the papers of the Melville leviathans; along with many others, Hayford, Sealts, and Bezanson have donated their substantial collections to the archive. Almost all were avid fans of Melville kitsch, and so along with the notes towards the publication of their various titanic works, you find numerous surprising examples of Melville as manifested in the popular imagination, such as a Sheldon Silverstein cartoon published in *Playboy* detailing Ahab’s “Obsession,” and a magazine centerfold of Melville’s war poetry replete with illustrations of the Vietnam conflict. Going through these papers, glancing at the occasional scribbled note or article, you also get a wonderful behind-the-scenes feel for the traditions and fads that have ebbed and flowed in Melville scholarship; I have come across no other guide or study that has more thoroughly enriched with idiosyncratic understanding my knowledge of Melville and the way he has been read.

The New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library is unique. The scholars’ quarters, comprising the second floor of the research library, are large, well equipped, and comfortable. Representations of Jonah, dying leviathans, and whaling voyages cover the walls; the books lining the shelves are almost all whale-related. This is an immersive experience and one that, anecdotally, has proved rich and varied. Evan Price, a twenty-one-year-old college student and former intern at the museum, shared the space for much of my stay and was kind enough to regale me with his extensive knowledge of maritime history, whaling, scrimshaw, and American football. Laura Pereira, Michael Dyer, Michael Lapidés, Stuart Frank, and Kate Mello—the familiar faces at the

library—were all very welcoming and helpful. One Thursday morning I was invited to attend what can only be described as a weekly Antique Scrimshaw Roadshow, held in the main reading room of the library. People from miles around come with their whale teeth and bones to have them appraised and discussed by the panel of the world's leading scrimshaw experts;—it is a wonderfully strange enclave of the universe.

If you organize your fellowship for January, you can also take part in the marathon reading of *Moby-Dick*, held in the Whaling Museum down the road. The camaraderie was fun, the clam chowder excellent, and to follow the sinews and digressions of the book in one long, somnolent session is to realize just how funny, maddening, and beautiful it is. After 25 hours of listening and reading, your tiredness fired by the promise of the last five chapters, you begin to slip into a sort of drowned hallucinatory reverie that is haunted by the museum's whale skeletons swimming above you. Highlights included Father Mapple's sermon acted out in the Seaman's Bethel, Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank's spirited reading of an early chapter, and "Cetology" read next to the skeleton of a sperm whale. I also enjoyed meeting and befriending Peter Gansevoort Whittemore—very much a conversationalist, reader, and thinker first, and Melville's great-great-grandson second.

Another reason to go in January is that you get to spend time with the ringleaders of the Melville Society Cultural Project. Wyn Kelley, Tim Marr, Bob Wallace, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, and Laurie Robertson-Lorant are all exceptionally generous and encouraging people. Much of my time was spent away from New Bedford: I had chowder and chats with Tim; Bob took me through Melville's print collection housed at the library; Laurie showed me the coastal paths around New Bedford; Mary K. gave me an extensive and fascinating tour of the *Charles W. Morgan* at Mystic Seaport, the last wooden whaling ship. Built in New Bedford alongside Melville's vessel the *Acushnet*, this really is a must-see for anyone interested in the spatial poetics or visual aspects of Melville's work; my readings of *Moby-Dick* were overhauled by the vessel's troglodytic dimensions.

Mary K. also arranged for me to be sung to by sea shantyman Don Sineti. This was particularly thrilling as my current project is concerned with Melville's use of the four-beat line in *Clarel*. Don has a baritone voice of unbelievable power, and the hour-long concert, consisting of the various long-haul, short-drag, and capstan shanties Melville knew, further developed my sense that Melville's robust versifying techniques were, in part, carved at sea. What Don's concert conveyed so well was the brute physicality of these songs—their forceful conflation of the bodily and the metrical; of human

anatomy cleaving to the meters of hard physical labour. Melville's infelicities of execution—his continual subjugation of the free-flowing speech rhythms to poetic form—were triumphantly vindicated by this context.

Finally, I would like to thank Wyn Kelley for her kindness and hospitality throughout my visit. She accompanied me to the Houghton Library at Harvard University, where we spent an afternoon reading and discussing Melville's manuscripts, she drove me around Concord, took me to Walden Pond, fed and watered me, and listened patiently to the still-forming ideas that comprise my thesis, offering much useful advice and encouragement along the way. This fellowship should be coveted by all post-grad Melvilleans and particularly by students from over-seas. Boston, New York and all of the mythical places we read about but never see are all reasonably short bus rides away. I urge you to apply.