



PROJECT MUSE®

Report: Melville Society—Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2012

Pilar Martínez Benedí

Leviathan, Volume 15, Number 2, June 2013, pp. 82-85 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/lvn.2013.0020



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lvn/summary/v015/15.2.benedi.html>

Report: *Melville Society—Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2012*

PILAR MARTÍNEZ BENEDÍ
Università di Roma, “La Sapienza”



Melville Society Archive Fellow Pilar Martínez Benedí in the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library. Photo courtesy of Mark Procknik.

I was lucky enough to be the Melville Society fellow in the same year that the annual MLA Convention was held in Boston. In January, I was able to be in residence at the Melville Society Archive in New Bedford as a Walter E. Bezanson Fellow, with a \$500 stipend and lodging in a trendy, post-industrial apartment at Wamsutta Mills, and also attend the Convention in Boston and the *Moby-Dick* Marathon in New Bedford.

And a marathon it was! With the members of the Melville Society Cultural Project, I went back and forth between Boston and New Bedford during

the first weekend of January, in order to make the best of this happy coincidence. I attended two Melville panels at MLA, as well as the splendid Melville Society annual dinner in Boston, where I had the chance to socialize with some of the Melvilleans I had met at the Rome conference almost two years before.

In New Bedford, a different kind of frenzy awaited us: meetings and archival and filing work with the members of MSCP, in which I was kindly allowed to participate, and the Marathon itself with its related events, beginning with the inaugural dinner at the Whaling Museum and Matt Kish's heartfelt lecture on his efforts to create and draw an image for every page of *Moby-Dick*. After the energetic performance of "Extracts" by our Melville scholars, the three famous words—"Call me Ishmael"—signaled the start of the seventeenth *Moby-Dick* Marathon. No Melville aficionado should miss this experience. The thrill of being an active part of it—"stumping" the scholars; reading, with a trembling voice, a fragment in Italian from "Queequeg in His Coffin"—I won't soon forget.

After twenty-five hours of continued reading, in different settings, with different voices and languages, the "Epilogue" closed the *Moby-Dick* Marathon. And then my own personal marathon began.

The Bezanson Fellowship offers a matchless opportunity: full access to the impressive Melville Society Archive as well as to the unique maritime and whaling-related materials of the Whaling Museum Research Library. Both collections offered unlimited, if very different, resources for my own work on trauma in Melville. My initial task was to figure out how to navigate most effectively through the resources.

In such a nautical environment, I was naturally drawn to the logbooks and sailors' journals the Library owns, which could give me a sense of how the hardships of sea-life and the perils of whaling were perceived and represented in Melville's time. With the invaluable help of Assistant Librarian Mark Procknik, I soon found my way into the fascinating world of these treasures. Apart from being a pleasure to the eye, these manuscripts register the seamen's reactions to the extreme experiences (violent deaths, stove boats, falls overboard) they witnessed or experienced first-hand, and their responses (homesickness, insanity, loneliness, depression) to the confinements of life at sea. While the logbooks gave me "dry" entries, which nevertheless attest to the existence and frequency of such potentially traumatic events, the journals are filled with personal reflections on events and enriched by interspersed poems and metaphysical musings. The serendipitous discovery of Log 1033, following a casual conversation with volunteer Jan Keener, was particularly thrilling: a long journal kept by Daniel C. Whitfield during his journey on board the *Dr. Franklin*, strikingly prefaced by a number of essays on whales, whose

apparently ordered index hides a digressive and chronologically disrupted narrative. Of course, I was reminded of Ishmael's mighty book!

My archival work at the Library would not have been complete without an enlightening chat with the Library's maritime curator, Mike Dyer. A swift description of my project was enough to prompt a flood of focused tips. He told me about Capt. Edmund Gardner, Cornelius Hulsart, and Samuel Comstock, whose (first-person or third-person) narratives were on hand at the Museum's Research Library and whose stories were well known to mariners at the time Melville was at sea.

Absorbing as this archival work was, I spent a good deal of my time at the Melville Archive, too. The variety of primary and secondary texts is overwhelming, offering valuable materials for those interested in Melville's sources. My curiosity drew me to the numerous annotated copies in the Hayford and Sealts collections, which provided insight into these scholars' responses to Melville texts and criticism. But my project drew me to the Archive's collection of maritime literature. I lingered on shipwreck accounts, including those collected in Huntress's *Narratives of Shipwrecks and Disasters* and Stackpole's *The Sea-Hunters*, as well as the tragedy of the *Essex* in Thomas F. Heffernan's *Stove by a Whale*.

The immersion in such whaling-related materials, in such a whaling-related setting, has immensely deepened my understanding of seafaring and the whaling industry, and has helped me locate Melville's writings within a cultural conversation about the human response to extreme experiences, in ways that further enlighten (and also confirm) my reading of *Moby-Dick*.

My time in New Bedford was not one of seclusion and hard work only. The generosity and care of the members of the Melville Society Cultural Project (Jennifer Baker, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Wyn Kelley, Tim Marr, Chris Sten, and Bob Wallace) buoyed me before, during, and after my stay in New Bedford. They took care of all the logistics, making sure that I would be comfortable and nourished, both at home and at work. I had Bob's guidance and support while I was preparing my trip; I was warmly welcomed by Wyn in Boston and had Mary K as my chauffeur and roommate at the Wamsutta. They showed genuine interest in hearing about my project at every stage, and they transmitted to me their knowledge and enthusiasm while we shared breakfasts and superb Portuguese dinners. Sharing this unique experience with them is yet another reason why the choice of January for the residency, when the MSCP members are in New Bedford, is advisable for every Fellow.

I also enjoyed the virtual company of former fellow Laura López Peña, whose priceless tips, advice, and support meant more than she can possibly guess (¡Gracias, Laura!). I could not possibly feel lonely, for I was never alone.

Bob Rocha, the Museum's Science Director, who exquisitely ran the Marathon, took good care of me, showing me around New Bedford and Fairhaven. Doug Kendall, the Museum's Registrar and my housemate at the Wamsutta, was always helpful and accommodating. I had the pleasure of meeting Laurie Robertson-Lorant during the Marathon, and she made sure that I discovered the cultural initiatives New Bedford has to offer. We shared views on Melville, Douglass, and life over a bowl of New England chowder.

I left New Bedford with a head full of ideas, loads of materials and bibliographical tips, thousands of digital images to transcribe, and the satisfactions of a most challenging, enriching, and productive experience, both intellectual and personal.