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# Report:

## *Melville Society—Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2015*

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Brad King and Sara Saylor reading at the *Moby-Dick* Marathon, New Bedford, MA, January 3, 2015. Photo courtesy of Wyn Kelley.

This winter I had the good fortune to spend my break from the University of Texas in the cavernous Research Library of the New Bedford Whaling Museum, courtesy of the Melville Society Cultural Project. I was there to learn about the foundation and early years of the Melville Society, but the library holds many wonders that one would be remiss to neglect. Mark Procknik, the warm, immensely helpful librarian, will happily tour you through an immensity of whaling logbooks of all shapes and sizes. Then there are the gregarious scholars of the Reading Room. I met one who was writing a book about African American whaling captains in the nineteenth century; he told me a story about one who had clapped a white sailor in irons and dumped him at the nearest port for calling another sailor that still singularly degrading, obscene n-word. After you make it through the Reading Room, you wind up

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the stairs and find your way into a defunct bank vault, whose only duty in its retirement from the stresses of finance is to guard boxes of Melville Society proceedings and the libraries of Harrison Hayford, Merton Sealts, Walter Bezanon, and other luminary Melvilleans. Taken together, these donated collections make up the Melville Society Archive, and they are the quarries into which we Bezanon Fellows are to mine.

I went to the Archive mostly to learn about F. Barron Freeman, many of whose letters are in the collection because he was a founding member of the Melville Society and its President in 1949. My interest in Freeman was sparked by his curiously redacted edition of *Billy Budd*, published in 1948 with Harvard University Press. This book printed a bowdlerized version of the novella that Freeman called “Baby Budd,” which expurgated its homoerotic passages and its scenes that question the legitimacy of Vere’s decision to execute Billy. Gone is Claggart’s “touch of soft yearning, as if [he] could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban,” as is Vere’s desire to look upon Billy and the moment in which he imagines him as “a fine specimen of the *genus homo*, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the fall.” Also redacted are the scenes that follow Billy’s execution, scenes that question Vere’s sanity and the legality of Billy’s trial and that document the crew’s seditious murmuring when they see Billy hanged.

How did Freeman conceptualize the relationship between his editorial work and the intensely homophobic moment in which he lived, when exposure as a so-called “sex pervert” meant professional ostracism and criminal punishment? How did he market the book? How did the scholarly community respond to it? And finally, what critical, sexual, and political values were at stake in publishing *Billy Budd* at midcentury? I brought these questions to the Melville Society Archive. And as I made my way through hundreds of yellowing letters, I learned that Freeman had been revered by his fellow scholars in the Melville Society; that he and the Society were conscious of an obscure 1946 British publication of *Billy Budd* that emerged from and circulated in queer communities; and that Freeman’s work on *Billy Budd* was originally intended to be part of what Society members affectionately called “the American Melville edition,” a complete edition of Melville’s corpus, sponsored by the Society.

This Society-backed “American Melville edition” fell through because a private publisher beat them to the punch. That publisher was Walter Hendricks, who began printing a “complete edition” of Melville’s writing in 1947 under the imprint of Hendricks House and only made it through eight of the proposed fourteen volumes: *Collected Poems* (1947, ed. Howard P. Vincent), *The Piazza Tales* (1948, ed. Egbert S. Oliver), *Pierre* (1949, ed. Henry A. Murray), *Moby-Dick* (1952, ed. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent),

*The Confidence-Man* (1954, ed. Elizabeth S. Foster), *Clarel* (1960, ed. Walter E. Bezanson), *Omoo* (1969, ed. Harrison Hayford and Walter Blair), and *Mardi* (1990, ed. Nathalia Wright). The intense arguments and legal disputes between Hendricks and Melville-Society leaders such as Tyrus Hillway and Howard P. Vincent form one of the compelling stories buried in the Melville Society Archive. But there are other gems waiting in this rich vault of Melvilleana, too: letters between the imprisoned Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James and Jay Leyda in which they discuss “criticism and life,” to quote James; letters from the Melville-obsessed, radical visual artist Gil Wilson; letters between the Society and John Huston’s staff for the 1956 *Moby-Dick* film, in which the Melvilleans take Hollywood to task for distorting Melville’s masterpiece. I also found an unpublished review of Richard Chase’s 1949 book about Melville, a review authored by Walter Bezanson himself. This insightful document—printed in the pages following this fellowship report—details Chase’s methodological innovations, and it documents the controversies that Chase’s virtuosic, personal style and blatantly anachronistic arguments stirred in the scholarly community.

These are but glimpses of what the Archive contains. So if you have any interest in the material history of Melville’s entry into twentieth-century intellectual, artistic, and popular cultures, then travel to New Bedford and immerse yourself in this treasure of American literary studies. I am enormously grateful to Gail Coffler, the late Walter Bezanson, and the Melville Society Cultural Project for establishing this fellowship, caring for the Archive, and giving me the opportunity to enjoy its riches.