



PROJECT MUSE®

**Report: Melville Society—Bezanson Archive Fellowship
2013**

Munia Bhaumik

Leviathan, Volume 16, Number 2, June 2014, pp. 87-89 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/lvn.2014.0028



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lvn/summary/v016/16.2.bhaumik.html>

Report:
*Melville Society—Bezanson Archive
Fellowship 2013*

MUNIA BHAUMIK
Emory University

In August of 2013, I had the honor and pleasure of conducting research at the Melville Society Archive housed at the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The generous support of both the Melville Society and the Whaling Museum staff not only enabled research on my current book project, *Democracy and Dramatic Form: The Figure of the Non-Citizen in the American Renaissance*, tracing statelessness in *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, “Benito Cereno,” and *Billy Budd*, but also allowed me to investigate the reception of Melville in multiple languages. I was impressed to find in New Bedford an early edition of *Israel Potter* that was not titled by the character’s name but rather as *The Refugee*. Such details inform my argument that the question of the non-citizen is at play in Herman Melville’s writings. The Melville Society Archive is notable for its compendium of Melville’s works across various languages. Its collection of annotated works by Melville scholars accounts for a history of reading and translation that is important to the study of statelessness in his writing.

My own interest in Melville and translation stems from the use and specter of non-English speech in Melville’s stories, particularly in “Benito Cereno” where such speech coincides with representations of law. In “Benito Cereno” the scene of slavery is where “conversation became constrained” and the possibility for a reciprocal dialogue was annihilated. “Constrained” conversation implies a condition of force that inhibits the speakers, presenting the scene of legal exclusion and enslavement as one of failed translation between marginal languages and the dominant one. Much like the subordination of the unwritten record to the written in Melville’s trial scenes, the marginalization of Ashanti relative to English indicates a colonial situation and delineates a non-European presence within the trial scene. As the court ascribes differential values to different languages, the imposition of English in particular coincides with a founding violence in the Americas and the transition from the Spanish to the United States Empire.

Vol. 16.2 (2014): 87–89 © 2014 The Melville Society and Johns Hopkins University Press

The setting of the story in the Americas prompted my curiosity about Melville's relation to Latin American languages, particularly Spanish and Portuguese, as well as language politics. Here, encountering Merton Sealts's own notes in *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed* and Mary K. Bercaw's *Melville's Sources* proved invaluable. While one can certainly encounter these books at university libraries, the notes at the margins of Sealts's own manuscripts and in his copies of Bercaw's *Melville's Sources* added nuance to histories and methods of reading Melville. Although *Melville's Sources* points to the limitations of Sealts's study alone, the marginal notation "good" in his copy of Bercaw's work points to his admiration of her precise study of Montaigne's influence on Melville's representation of the "Grand Armada." Such marginalia are the delight of researching a history of reading and critical debates, prompting reflections on how a world, and not just a nation, of philosophy and languages resides behind the scenes of writing.

While travel narratives, including Antonio de Ulloa's *A Voyage to South America* (1758), certainly had an impact on Melville's portrayals of the region, the research on his influences also reveals a keen interest in comparative literature beginning with Goethe's *Faust* and an attentiveness to a repertoire of writings in romance languages. In Melville's father's library, as Sealts showed, there was a constant circulation of writings in French. Melville was also drawn to Spanish and Portuguese, owning and annotating the writings of Cervantes, Calderon, and Luis de Camões in English, Spanish, and Portuguese versions. The reading of Calderon indicates that Melville's adaptations of dramatic technique extend beyond Shakespeare and include the *teatro* of Spain's *Siglo de Oro* as well as *Cyrano de Bergerac*, "a comical history of the states and the empires of the world." While it is unclear if Melville read Spanish and Portuguese with much fluency, the annotations in some of the books he owned written in languages other than English point to a labor of reading in other languages and an understanding of the importance of multilingualism.

Certainly, as we can ascertain from both the log of the whaleship *Acushnet* and the social space of New Bedford (where Portuguese is still very much a living language), the imprint of a Lusophone and Hispanophone world can be counted among his influences that, if not read, were heard. We may speculate that this notion of literature as worldly and comparative leads Melville to advocate against abolishing Hawaiian languages in his lectures "The South Seas" and, thus, implicitly to question the effects of the US annexation of Hawaii on indigenous culture. In these lectures, he refers to a "massacre" in Hawaii where "bamboo huts have been sprinkled with the blood and brains of women and children."

Translation is important to Melville studies, as evident in both Sealts's and Harrison Hayford's collections of works. Hayford, in particular, compiled a treasury not only of various editions in English but also of Melville's circulation in Italian, Japanese, French, Finnish, and German. The years of some translations—including German and Finnish versions of *Moby-Dick* in 1955 and 1957, respectively, and a curated collection of poems by Luigi Bertì published in Florence in 1947—also tell the story of a continental post-war reception of Melville and emergent interest in American literature. Translations of Melville vary from interest in his formal anomalies and style to introductions to the writings as a view into “la norteamérica de *Moby-Dick*,” as found in Fernando Velasco Garrido's 2006 Spanish translation of *Moby-Dick; O La Ballena*. The translators' introductions to various Melville texts provide evidence of how both Melville and North America are perceived in the world. Translations of Melville found within the general collection at the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library also move between media forms, often completely transfiguring the chapters from *Moby-Dick* into images, as we now find with the most recent translation of the classic into the digital pictographic language of Emoji!

While this research on Melville in translation is preliminary, I am grateful for the opportunity not only to visit the collection but to meet the walking archive of Melville Society scholars who congregated in the library as I was diving into the collection. As they were laboriously organizing the collection, each would return to my desk with offerings and comments to assist with my inquiries. I left New Bedford most impressed by this fellowship among Melville scholars, a conversation celebrated in acts of translating his work.