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International Conference “Melville’s Measures”

Université de Lille and Université de Paris, October 17-19, 2019

**Mathilde Louette, Caroline Hildebrandt, Thibault Lefebvre, Cloé Mariacourt
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International Conference “Melville’s Measures”

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Link to the conference program:

<https://mmeasures2019.sciencesconf.org/resource/page/id/3>

- 1 The international conference “Melville’s Measures” was initiated by Ronan Ludot-Vlasak (Université de Lille) and Cécile Roudeau (Université de Paris), with the support of the research units CECILLE (Université de Lille) and LARCA (Université de Paris), and the contribution of the MESHS, the CNRS and the IUF. It took place between October 17th and October 19th, 2019, at both the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme et de la Société (MESHS) in Lille and the Université de Paris. Held on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the author’s birth, the conference sought to assess the leviathanic scale and import of Herman Melville’s oeuvre and its legacy, still prevalent today. The three-day conference featured an impressive cast of international scholars, renowned and emergent, who showed the sheer vivacity of Melville studies – an ever-evolving field constantly proposing new angles to help us appraise the author and his work. Facing a no less momentous conference, this account will try to give a measure of the challenging readings and approaches offered during the numerous panels and parallel workshops held during the conference.

1. Forms of art

- 2 Measuring Melville consisted first of all in measuring the very fabric of his oeuvre, on an aesthetic level. The first keynote speaker **Cody Marrs** (University of Georgia)

considered beauty in Melville as an aesthetic measurement – a “circumambient spell that expends and exceeds boundaries.” For instance, Marrs analyzed how the whale’s tail in *Moby-Dick* mashes aesthetic categories of the material and immaterial world and of the beautiful and the sublime into a unique aesthetic experience. To him, the Melvillean world is a world of “ideas, actions, elemental forces, splashes of color [...] and physiognomy of human faces” where beauty circulates, creating a “somatic and strategic” art. Marrs showed how *Timoleon* exemplified this process of stylistic mingling – an “oceanic style” which in the collection even pervades Egyptian pyramids to the point of creating a “psychogeographical displacement.” Marrs insisted on the importance of a Melvillean concept of beauty for American literary studies, sensing beauty in Melville as a key concept to issues such as capitalism and ecology. But where does ugliness stand? To Marrs, it is counterbalanced by an excess of beauty or a mastered rendition of it.

- 3 **Samuel Otter** (University of California at Berkeley) then guided us through the extracts opening *Moby-Dick*. He emphasized how the apparent fragmentation of the section was actually underlaid by a carefully wrought system of resonances. To him, Melville proposes a crossing of boundaries even before the narrative begins, merging prose and poetry, extracts and underlying narratives – a technique furthered in the rest of the book. Otter was particularly sensitive to Melville’s technique of juxtaposition which he linked to the organic structure of the book, entailing a process of “velocity and vitality.” *Moby-Dick* is an “engine of formal possibilities” encompassed in a “global form,” Otter concluded.
- 4 Attuning us even further to Melvillean forms, **Katie McGettigan** (Royal Holloway, University of London) explored the noise to be heard in *Battle-Fields and Other Aspects of the War*. A record of the Civil War scenes of fighting, the collection voices out numerous figures of the war, modes and formats of warfare and the conveyance of their progress through new channels of information. McGettigan analyzed noise as the “intensity of relationships between groups and individuals” and as the “new modes of concentrated listening.” To her, Melville registered the reactions to the Civil War in full scope, voicing out the different groups which were affected by the war to the point of mingling human and non-human elements in the din of war. In the second acceptance, noise can also be read as the new means of communication and information of the period – such as the telegraph – testifying to new proximity to traumatic scenes and to the partial understanding of the conflict it delivered. To McGettigan, Melville makes his poetry the echo chamber of usually unregistered aspects of this conflict of a whole new kind for the American nation.
- 5 **Mathieu Duplay** (Université de Paris) then chose to listen to Melvillean spectres in Alice Goodman’s libretto of John Adams’s opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*. Duplay suggested that the architecture and trajectory of the libretto resembles Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, in the way both works display an “atmosphere of moral and metaphysical uncertainty” and weave reflections on the links between history, myth and the power of catastrophe to negotiate the links between the two. A take on the Achille Lauro hijacking in 1985 and the Arab-Israeli tensions of the period, the opera offers numerous arias and choruses taking up tropes common to the ones found in Melville’s novel, though centuries and traditions apart. Duplay suggested Goodman would perform a sort of “ventriloquism” of Melville in her writing, attesting to a “nobility to escape history.”

- 6 Several interventions chose language itself as their main focus. **Christopher Christiansen** (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) gave a reading of *Clarel* where he proposed a turn towards language to gauge the loss of faith narrated in the poem, focusing more especially on the semiotics of stones: indeed, words and stones both outlast us. His pragmatist approach showed that the poem shifts the nature of the spiritual quandary from an inner conflict to a problem constituted by the physical and practical world surrounding us, and by its legibility and interpretation. The conflict between faith and doubt is to be read in the embodied ways the different characters in the poem relate to the Holy Land, with their own sets of expectations. As such, reading stones in the poem testifies to "competing practices of faith," eventually creating numerous communities of interpretation which *Clarel* can experience.
- 7 **K.L. Evans** (independent scholar) took up this linguistic turn, proposing a reading of *Clarel* along with Mauthner's *Critique of Language* and the Wittgensteinian school of philosophy. She explored further the notion of agreeing communities as the basis of sense-making, while tracing her reflection back to Lockean elements, contemporary to Melville himself. She insisted on the ambiguity caused by words and the subjective quality of their meaning, while also pointing to the possibility offered by the choice of words.
- 8 **Amy R. Nestor** (independent scholar) gave a more metrical approach to her analysis of language, focusing on repetitions, rhythms and the poetic quality of language in *Pierre*. Her intervention focused on the curious repetition of the word "thing" in the novel, which she sensed as a peculiar stylistic feature on Melville's part. This enabled her to analyze the character of Isabelle more thoroughly, and delineate the "ambient quality" of the novel based on the strange recurrence of words and constitutive affects which are related to them.

2. Subjectivities, bodies and affective materiality

- 9 On another note, several panels addressed the question of subjectivity in Melville's oeuvre, focusing more especially on the place of bodies and their affects. Through a structuralist, Foucauldian and neo-materialist prism, **Edouard Marsoin** (Université de Paris) offered a reading of several of Melville's works focusing on diets as epistemological indexes, entailing both literary and historical considerations – a critical tool of measurement in its own right. Focusing on *Mardi* and *Pierre*, but also on the short story "The Fiddler," he analyzed the different discursive traditions (literary and historical) – or "regimes" – which underpin the diets at play in the works and how they shed new lights on their diegeses. In *Mardi*, reflections on "fat men" are to be thought about notably with both the Renaissance and humanist regimes and the 19th-century ones. In *Pierre*, the evolution of the character's diets entails a reflection on the norms of masculinity and sexuality in the 19th century, just as it questions the representations of the romantic subject in a transatlantic frame of thought. Marsoin's broad epistemological approach included the questioning of American discourses on food on both its biopolitical but also metaphysical levels, while also bearing in mind Melville's own artistic imaginary.
- 10 Furthering the Foucauldian perspective, **Arturo Corujo** (Universitat de Barcelona) and **Pilar Martínez Benedi** (Università degli Studi dell'Aquila) addressed the place of bodies in *White-Jacket*. Corujo used Foucault's ideas in *Discipline and Punish* to account

for life on the Neversink, comparing the structure of the ship to the panopticon and analyzing different situations in the narrative as instances of internalized discipline within the context of a 19th century man-of-war and its violent disciplinary measures. Martínez Benedi focused more especially on the relation of the body to space. Starting from an analysis of the second chapter, she confronted two different conceptions of space: space as dynamics and space as fixed, assigned position. In her reading, corporeality and the analysis of the different embodied narrative strategies Melville uses can also be read as "antidotes to [the] spatial confinement" implied in the world of a regulated man-of-war. Her Deleuzian approach – focusing rather on the affective quality of corporeality as it is experienced in the process of narration – enabled her to offer a more hopeful perspective on bodily disciplines than readings of the novel which are solely denunciatory of sailors' dire conditions.

- 11 Assessing bodily affects was the focus of other discussions. **Thomas Constantinesco** (Université de Paris) used pain as his prism of analysis of the Melvillean universe. Relocating it within the epistemological context of the 19th century, Constantinesco saw pain as an issue of figuration which enables Melville to explore the nation's overall effort to measure it. He also underlined the very limitations of what he called this "arithmetics of pain," thus raising political, literary, scientific, historical and artistic questions. Browsing through characters and narrators, from Ahab to Hunilla, Ishmael and Pierre, he sensed how the representation of pain exceeds or belies the controlling process of calculation and measurement. For example, Hunilla's markings on her rod in *The Encantadas* confuse rather than compute time and intensify her pain instead of relieving it. Questioning the 19th-century tradition of sympathy underpinning these discourses, Constantinesco analyzed how the supposed equivalence of affects is belied in the Melvillean universe – a position he explored by analyzing Ishmael's voice in *Moby-Dick*. Sensing an overall formlessness in Ishmael's representation of Ahab and the latter's pain, Constantinesco highlighted an affective asymmetry between the two characters testifying to the illusory nature of sympathy and the impossibility of a proper sharing of the other's suffering.
- 12 Next, **David Blake** (The College of New Jersey) focused on prosthetics in *Moby-Dick*. The crafting of Ahab's leg is a key nexus in the book which questions the very notion of measuring, not only literally (the need for measurement in the carpenter's practice) but also in its anthropological, medical and metaphysical aspects, Blake argued. The carpenter's activity shows how difficult it is to "calculate Ahab's dismemberment, as it combines physical, conceptual and metaphysical experiences of the material world." Indeed, his arduous crafting showcases the very problem of measuring Ahab's wounded body: recurring mentions of the whalebone used for the new leg create a network of significations ranging from traumatic experience to the recording of time and eventually of Ahab's very position in the maritime world. Ahab's prosthetics also challenges his humanity on a metaphysical level: embracing the prosthesis, he refuses to be linked to Adam's fall which he links to his former limb ("Canst thou not drive that old Adam away?" *Moby Dick*). Blake also inscribed the analysis of the lost leg within a 19th century medical episteme, focusing more especially on the notion of a "phantom limb." To him, Melville foreshadows the emergence of this medical category which will only be coined after the Civil War.
- 13 **Ryan Heryford** (California State University) sought to relocate Ishmael's practices of measurements in the 19th century scientific context. Seeking to analyze the narrator's

"occasions of extinction and exhaustion" in the novel, he suggested that instead of evoking a melancholy ethos, this technique testified to the artistic possibilities offered by a mastering of what he called Ishmael's "fossiliferous point of view," playing with numerous time spans. He focused on historicist considerations of debates around biogenesis in Melville's time and buttressed his textual analyses with Alexander van Humboldt's natural scientific discoveries and the principles of geology and paleontology of Edward Hitchcock. Seeking to delineate how Ishmael's attempts at measuring whales and time spans particularly responded to these, he proposed to define the latter's practice as an overall "ontology of desertification." He eventually highlighted the narrator's mastery and conjugation of both premodern and postapocalyptic times in his narration, sensing that "exhaustion" led him to the idea of an "awesome general time."

- 14 Several presentations addressed the question of affects while dealing with the materiality of measuring techniques, of the production of texts and of the global 19th century. **Maurice S. Lee** (Boston University) gave insights on the different discourses on measurement of the period and on the context of mass production and distribution of books and printing in Melville's time, in a transatlantic framework. Lee stressed how these conditions fostered an "empire of qualification and standardization." With some examples from *Moby-Dick*, he showed how Melville responded to these in an ambiguous way, defining his stance as one mingling skepticism and pluralism, showing the practice of mensuration as being both limited and legitimate. **Paul Hurh** (University of Arizona) focused more particularly on the affective quality fostered by these new conditions of production and consumption of literary texts but also by mass media in general. To him, mass print culture showcased "new emergent affective experiences in Melville's relation with print" which, parallel to Katie McGettigan's work, he located in Melville's relation to periodicals. Interestingly, Hurh also focused on other less addressed texts by Melville, notably his letters, which to him testify to an overall pervasiveness of magazine culture. **Edward Sugden** (King's College, London) eventually shifted the affective focus to alternative temporalities to help us rescale the massive interconnectedness sketched in the previous interventions. Sugden started with the evocation of the date mentioned in chapter 85 of *Moby-Dick*, December 16th, 1851 – hinting at the very time of Melville's writing –, and offered a synchronic journey through journal entries, letters and news clips across different continents and contemporary to Melville's own thinking about whales. Sugden opened us up to synchronic dimensions instead of Melville's habit of diachronic ponderings.

3. Core sciences

- 15 Several speakers explored the relationship that Melville and his works foster with core sciences, in order to see how Melville reworks objective scientific data to fit the measure of his imagination. The second keynote speaker **Branka Arsić** (Columbia University) worked from *Mardi*, suggesting the concept of "coral psyches" to define Melville's art and technique in the novel. She focused on the recurrence of "zoophytes" in the narrative, a former natural history term designating beings at the crossroads of the vegetable and animal kingdom, such as corals. After having given a thorough record of the scientific archive known to Melville at his time of writing (notably through Cuvier and Darwin), Arsić emphasized the capacity of these corals to build

networks – a feature she raised to the level of archaeological, artistic and ethical trope for the whole novel. To Arsić, *Mardi* possesses a “generalized coral ontology” and is an “ambient” novel in which all life is shared and in which characters and stories process through a thickening of sensuous elements, but also an ability to change and act according to their milieu. This enabled her to come to the concept of an “ambient person,” which she suggested was something Melville came to fully achieve in *Moby-Dick* in the character of Ishmael.

- 16 **Michael Jonik** (University of Sussex) explored Melville’s subversive and dynamic geometry of bodies and minds. What Melville deemed the “visible truth” indicates the writer’s part in dissolving the classical understanding of space and its discourse and providing a new equation for the American understanding of space as intensive quantity. Melville developed what Jonik termed “metaphysical modes of spatiality” such as oceanic spans acting against bodies, or the curious internal structure of the whale’s head. Thus, Melvillean spaces are fluidic and non-metric. Ruled by nautical geometry, they are interconnected systems of individualities where distances are thought of in terms of speed and “thickening clusters of whales,” and where movement belongs to “whirlpools, maelstroms and eddies.” Jonik showed how Melvillean nautical worlds bring out a subversive geometry which thrives on great disorder that eventually turns into ataraxic order.
- 17 **Federico Bellini** (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) also linked *Moby Dick* with Melville’s knowledge in mathematics and geometry. His presentation notably featured an animation illustrating the tautochrone property on a cycloid curve, a phenomenon by which objects put any place will reach the lowest point at the same time. In the end, the objects follow the fastest trajectory between points A and B, a figure which Bellini saw as a metaphor for nature moving by the easiest and fastest ways. He also evoked the influence of Spinoza on Melville, and dealt with the ideas of collective and individual bodies.
- 18 **Meredith Farmer** (Wake Forest University) looked at Melville’s relation to the model of early organic chemistry. She claimed that as Melville was educated in sciences, his portrayal of the human must first be non-human. She looked at two key passages from *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* which broach chemical transformations essential in rethinking measurements. Melville wrote in the era of new chemicals and pharmaceuticals, and he dealt with inorganic material derived from living natural bodies. The “human” had become a molecular structure, an immaterial life-force, a process and a constitution, understood as an organized being in the midst of perpetually changing structures. Melville’s encounter with chemistry engages readily with the concept of life and its (re)organization. He draws on technical terminology and turns natural laws into scientific narratives in order to imagine an alternative system feeding on chemical models.
- 19 **Hannah Murray** (University of Liverpool) then read *Bartleby* through the prism of race science and its attachment to whiteness. In *Bartleby*, Murray argued, Melville portrays a failure, or refusal, to demonstrate the core values of whiteness. Bartleby becomes a liminal white figure; his lack of labour, self-improvement and autonomy means a lack of white civic values. Murray resorted to Sara Ahmed’s spatial notion of “around-whiteness,” i.e. how people who move in the world the same way influence areas for those who don’t, to show how Bartleby also loses his access to “white” areas of being. Marked as a non-citizen, likened to furniture and constrained into different postures,

Bartleby's body becomes the narrator's property. Eventually, he turns into text itself: the rumors will speak for the undemonstrative clerk. Bartleby cannot occupy whiteness, Murray concluded, before asking: what happens when someone dismisses the cultural expectations set by racialized standards? The question is still relevant today.

- 20 **Michel Imbert** (Université de Paris) finally explored the link between "angels" and "angles" through excerpts of Melville's *Pierre*, despite their lack of common etymology. He elaborated on the idea of celestial hierarchy, involving paradoxes of time and physical temporalities and the discrepancies between God's alleged universal values and relative values. He went on showing that these paradoxes reflect Pierre's desperate attempt to assert his values in a world that will not understand them.

4. Social sciences

- 21 Several panels sought to measure the extent of Melville's historical, political and economic relevance both in the 19th century and in today's world. One of those was devoted to revolutions. First, **Duncan Faherty** (CUNY) read *Benito Cereno* as an "index of the globality of the Black Atlantic," linking the events on the San Dominick to the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) – an event often left out of the history of revolutions today. Faherty argued that the Haitian revolution provides an essential socio-political backdrop against which to reread *Benito Cereno*. The study of Melville's understanding of the global networks of the Black Atlantic in terms of language, culture, economy, commerce and religion – especially as presented in *Benito Cereno* – may help teach students about these networks to better connect the cultural histories of England, Africa, America and the Caribbean.
- 22 **Elizabeth Duquette** (Gettysburg College) also offered a reading of *Benito Cereno*, linked to a definition of tyranny as lawlessness and "un-freedom" rather than oppression – i.e. a systematic denial of rights for a specific group of people (here, slaves). To Duquette, the novella can be read as anti-slavery writing, as it foregrounds the fundamental human right to rebellion and questions patterns of power relations. Associating tyranny to the figure of the British king, Americans failed to acknowledge the existence of tyranny after the Revolution and the victory over George the Third. Yet to Duquette, slavery is stuck "in the shadows," between rhetorical and actual tyranny. Thus, *Benito Cereno* provides a vision of slavery as a domestic *and* a political institution, which questions the "tyrannical complacency" of the passive approval of slavery. Indeed, tyranny cannot be fought if nobody is looking for it – it works best when it remains unacknowledged. Would *Benito Cereno* be a pacifist black narrative then? Conversely, it can also be seen as complicit to slavery and undermining any form of equality.
- 23 **Jennifer Greiman** (SUNY) concluded this panel by looking at "revolutions" as movements in space, where a parallel between the laws of physics and moral laws can help assess the questioning of morality in Melville's work. She referred to Frederick Douglass's vision of gravity as a political force, notably his mention of the complex figure of the Bunker Hill monument and its inexorable gravity as a metaphor of revolutionary rhetoric. Douglass created a link between natural laws, political laws and power relations. These transpired in the condition of black people as well as in the shaping of their identities through time, political temporalities and epistemology. Greiman expanded on Melville's use of gravity in *The Bell-Tower* and *Battle-pieces and*

Aspects of the War in combination with other forces and movements, mentioning anti-slavery resistance as both a political and a natural force.

- 24 Another panel brought together deconstructive readings of authority. **Richard Anker** (Université Clermont-Auvergne) focused on the event of the death penalty in *Billy Budd*, in order to grasp its political dimension. He called on Derrida's reflections on the death penalty. The latter argues for a philosophical and not just juridical reading of the death penalty to assess the power of its representation in literature: whether to abolish it through plain writing or parody, or to deconstruct it as a form of techno-political idealism, as, according to Anker, *Billy Budd* does. Anker's goal was to demystify ironical interpretations of Billy Budd's ascension and of the narrative meaning of the text. To him, ironical readings have not accounted for the significance that the death penalty holds in the narrative economy of the story. Anker suggested that the theatricality of the death of Billy Budd represents a phenomenological "explosiveness" which resides in a double movement by which the narrative and theological scaffolding of the death penalty is simultaneously erected and collapsed, constituted and de-constituted, thus revealing the deconstructive force of the text in its power of excessive representation, eschewing plainly ironical readings.
- 25 **Nicholas Spengler** (University College London) then spoke of the mystical foundation of authority in *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick* and in Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, arguing that natural emergencies such as squalls at sea allow forms of just authority to emerge. To Spengler, Derrida's notion of an undecidable tension between justice and law as locus for the very possibility of justice, is at the heart of political authority in Melville and Douglass. In *White-Jacket's* squall, Melville's metaphor of the "needle to the load-stone" resorts to natural magnetism to describe Mad Jack's instantaneous natural authority over the crew, worthy of Emerson's natural aristocrat. In *Moby-Dick*, during the white squall episode, Ahab appears as a coercive avatar of the Emersonian figure; if Mad Jack represents the transcendent justice of natural law, Ahab stands for violence and the malleability of positive law. Yet together they represent the undecidability of the relation between law and justice. Finally, Douglass's Madison embodies a higher, divine law. He summons the natural power of the sea to establish freedom and authority: "Mr mate, you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free." Spengler concluded that both Douglass and Melville are working through the tension between authority as natural force or performance, which holds up the possibility of justice and emergent forms of political authority.
- 26 **Tae Sung** (California Baptist University) also resorted to Derrida's writings to examine the impossibility of a non-economic gift in Melville, through three moments of analysis. The first moment posited the impossibility of a free and unmeasured gift: gifts always disappear into an economy of exchange. Melville captures these moments when gifts between strangers or friends turn into return on investment or loans that result in resentment. The second moment looked at the impossibility of the gift itself, taking up Branka Arsić's concept of the impersonal as inhabiting rather than canceling the self. To Sung, *The Confidence-Man* seeks out the impossible gift in the face of a capitalist world of strangers driven by self-interest – witness the subjection of charity to the "methodization of the world's benevolence" (CM). Lastly, Sung looked at the unappropriated gift: indeed, these narratives are not so much a critique of gifts as such but a critique of the conditions that reduce gifts to their exchange value only. The

question then would be, what happens when we no longer have the interpretative frameworks to imagine gifts in non-economic terms, and how can gifts condition our modes of exchange in more dynamic ways?

- 27 Deconstructing Melville also gave way to analyzing figures of all kinds in his works. **Daniel Jenkins-Smith** (Aston University) dealt with the motif of the clerk in *Bartleby*, comparing it to preceding works by Dickens, Gogol, and Balzac. He argued that although clerk portraits were not new (even if the narrator presents his own attempt to draw them as unprecedented), *Bartleby* nonetheless offers new ways of "computing clerkdom" by organizing its figures within a closed system where they can be described, or scaled, only in relation to each other. Reading *Bartleby* as well, **Beatrix Pernelle** (Université de Nice) focused on punctuation. To her, the character of Bartleby is implicitly present through the punctuation, in accordance to the quotation: "One prime thing was this,—*he was always there*" (BS). Pernelle suggested that the typography allows the reader to visually enter the text, and that any comma, dash, or use of italics has a meaning. Similarly, **Marcy Dinius**'s (DePaul University) intervention showed how the asterisks in the legal deposition at the end of *Benito Cereno* can be read against the backdrop of the enslavers' racist perceptions.
- 28 After political and cultural reflections, Melvillean economic perspectives came into focus. **Rodrigo Andrés** (Universitat de Barcelona) offered a reading of Melville's short story "I and My Chimney" (1856) through the analysis of houses and homes as spaces of alternative temporalities. Melville's text plays with non-normative space and time to make them into queer time and queer space of resistance, claimed Andrés. He acknowledged Melville's tongue-in-cheek humor in the creation of a masculine narrator who appears as a pathetic *pater familias*. When familial and social norms stop to be reproduced, queer opportunities appear. The narrative showcases two gestures of resistance to bourgeois hetero-normative homemaking: the narrator's lack of interest for his lineage and for the economic future of his family. Melville's short story refuses the linear theory of transmission and draws the lines of a different genealogy, which embraces the failure of lineage and invites to the poetry of a different future.
- 29 Next, **Joe Conway** (University of Alabama) showed how Melville's works testify to an obsession with the physicality of money. *The Confidence-Man* expresses the fantasy of the world's conversion to the American dollar as Archimedean money-power: one fixed point that can move the world. Conway illustrated this with an engraving from Imlay and Bicknell's *Coins of the World* (1859) where the four corners of the world stand under the aegis of a gold American dollar around which the earth rotates. The engraving testifies to young America's hope that their monetary system would function despite the absence of a federal banking system, at a time when foreign coins were not accepted anymore. In this chaotic monetary world, Melville portrays the material aspect of money against its contemporary dematerialization. His obsession with the quotidian stuff of life pauses the capitalist exchange and explores other forms of social relations. He emphasizes the materiality of money as if his works of fiction operated like works of friction, Conway concluded.
- 30 Finally, **Douglass Madison Furrh** (Colorado State University Pueblo) exposed the piracy of capitalism embodied in the character of Delano in *Benito Cereno*. Delano's psychosis and conspiratorial thinking are reminiscent of the Know-nothing party, whose rise in Massachusetts Melville witnessed. The protagonist becomes a way for Melville to question racial superiority and white progress. To Furrh, Melville

dramatizes free-trade capitalist ideology and know-nothing republicanism in three ways. First, Delano is unable to understand the revolt because of his racism, cynicism, disdain for aristocrats and lust for money – prejudices encoded into his hypocritical practice of “republican impartiality.” Second, the capitalist virtues of industry and commerce delude Delano into questioning Cereno’s command as an aristocrat, and confuse his perception of the revolt. Third, the imperialism of the collapsing Spanish empire is linked to the United States through the “battered and moldy” San Dominick which embodies the decline of the former and bears the name of a famous pirate ship, making Delano into a pirate as he eventually commits murder for gold, legitimated under the American flag. *Benito Cereno* provides a dire warning to contemporary America, as a young nation treading in the footsteps of a corrupt old-world empire, Furrh concluded.

5. Travels: metaphysical and physical journeys

- 31 Several papers sought to measure Melville’s journeys, be they terrestrial or spiritual ones. **Julien Nègre** (ENS Lyon) proposed to scale down our focus by looking at an intriguing footnote in chapter 44 of *Moby-Dick*. An addition made in the late edition of the novel, the footnote was added by Melville and referred to a map drawn by Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury. Nègre’s reflection started from the temporal disjunction between Ahab’s project – an imaginary act set in the temporality of the narration – and the very actuality of the footnote grounded in the time of the writing of the text. To him, Melville’s juxtaposition of the imaginary rendition of the expansionist ethos and the very scientific actuality in which it is embedded enables us to give a new turn to our reading of Ahab’s mapping practices. Melville’s apparent equating of the two practices, as he stresses their corresponding features, is revealed as ironic when we compare the actual map by Maury and Ahab’s practice. To Nègre, the footnote works as an ironic counterpoint, enhancing and revealing Ahab’s monomaniac potential. Maury’s map, as a cultural object still in completion at the time of writing testifies to a vivacity of mapping practices in the book, not as mere instances of figuration or illustrative processes, but engaging objects with epistemological and reflexive potential.
- 32 **Divyajyoti Singh** (J.C. Bose University of Science and Technology, YMCA) sought to offer a reading of *Moby-Dick* tying it to writers of modern sciences. Singh arrived at the conclusion that Melville’s writing could be compared to modern science writing, with its capacity to mingle different sets of discourses. **Odile Gannier** (Université de Nice) offered a reading of *Mardi* in which she traced the numerous connections to antebellum discourses and epistemologies of the sea and celestial navigation. She more especially linked these to the different worldly traditions evoked in the romance, be they Polynesian or Western ones.
- 33 Measuring Melville’s world was also the occasion for several scholars to draw a map of Melville’s thinking, exploring “the world of mind” (*Mardi*). **Ross Martin** (University of Michigan) focused on the figuration of the demonic and its origins in *Moby-Dick*, tracing it to Goethe’s conceptions, and not merely to gnostic ones. Martin’s intervention emphasized the blurriness that the demon figure represented as it mingles categories of the human and the non-human, while also stressing its dangerous potential as mere appearance – a notion he questioned using Deleuzian theories of the simulacrum. The

audience also addressed the Platonic origins of the demonic in Melville. **Jonathan Schroeder** (University of Warwick) then discussed the notion of race in the novel, while embedding his reflection in contemporary discourse about race and linking it with an analysis of Ahab's monomania. **Ron Paul** (University of York) offered a reading of the chapter "A Bower in the Arsacides" in *Moby-Dick*, in which he highlighted the positivist nature of the chapter. To him, the chapter is the apex of Ishmael's narrating craft, as it is one of the chapters in *Moby-Dick* in which the measure of the divine is made at its most immanent level, while also offering a forsaking of radical immanence in order to acknowledge the underlying presence of the "weaver God."

6. Epilogue: receptions

- 34 A discussion entitled "Melville studies in Europe" was moderated by Agnès Derail and included representatives of Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, and France. **Rodrigo Andrés** (Universitat de Barcelona) began by accounting for "30 years of Melville in Spain (1990-2020)." In a situation described as dire, exceptions must be celebrated: the 1991 Salamanca conference for the centenary of Melville's death, the dynamism of the Spanish Association for American Studies – whose 2019 edition devoted several panels to Melville – and the sophisticated editions of Melville in Spanish. The situation is changing for the better in Spain thanks to the development of digital humanities, fostering new scholars, and thanks to a new focus on Melville's relation to Latin America. Andrés encouraged European scholars to cultivate their European specificity and work from their own point of view in order to give their national perspective its critical and theoretical voice.
- 35 **Federico Bellini** (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) dated the tradition of Melvillean studies in Italy back to Cesare Pavese's 1932 translation of *Moby Dick*. Scholarly engagement with Melville's work started in the 1950s, where Melville was seen in turn as a herald of symbolism or realism – a dichotomy resolved in the 1960s through structuralist readings of his works. The 1980s saw the rise of a post-structuralist and internationalized approach, led by the new perspectives offered in gender theory or cultural studies. Giuseppe Nori's *La sconfitta della scrittura* (1986) exemplifies this age as it reads *Pierre* as a radical critique of antebellum America. History, philosophy and literature came together in this phase (see, for instance, Giorgio Agamben's work) which lasted into the 1990s, along with meta and didactic studies which confirmed the place of American literature in Italian universities. The Rome conference of 2011 reevaluated Melville's connection to Italy and its culture; a connection still present in interdisciplinary interests and even in contemporary artworks.
- 36 **Edward Sugden** (King's College London) then reminded us that *Moby-Dick* was first published in England under the title *The Whale*. At the time, scholars and literati criticized its patchiness and incoherence; yet Victorian audiences praised its exoticism. Because of a publishing defect, the novel ended with the sinking of the Pequod and Ishmael – stripped of his individuality – died with the crew. This anecdote provides a useful motif for thinking about American studies in England, as this ending has shaped readings of *Moby-Dick* where the politics of the collective supersede the individual. British American studies will fain strip the novel of its liberal reading or allegorical liberalism. However, this comes both as power and detriment: it is a less determining

way of reading Melville without telos or meta-narrative, yet it might be difficult to teach Melville while assuming the Declaration of Independence might not mean anything, Sugden emphasized. Thus, British American studies are both freeing and constricting. Sugden also mentioned British responses to Melville taking place outside the institutional setting – such as Led Zeppelin's "Moby-Dick" guitar solo.

- 37 Finally, **Agnès Derail** (ENS Paris) described the "small French Melvillean world." After Jean Giono's translation of *Moby-Dick*, Melville really made his entrance into French academia with the post-war generation who abandoned romantic readings to lay emphasis on the signifier. For instance, Viola Sachs saw in Melville's texts a counter-bible which subverted American values of white male supremacy, capitalism, and religious conformity. Scrutiny of the sign and display of the letter were the mottoes of this motley generation of analysts working with the tools of deconstruction and structuralism. Later, scholars moved away from *Moby-Dick* to explore other texts. More recently still, Melville's poetry has been translated, *The Confidence-Man* appeared on the 2018 *agrégation* syllabus and a young generation of scholars continues to nurture innovative perspectives. Finally, Melvillean studies in France bear the mark of the interconnection between literary and philosophical analysis, as Melville's ambiguous exploration of truth has made him a choice concern of French philosophy.
- 38 Various scholars also traced Melville within references in works contemporary both to the author's time and ours, including painting, film and novel. **Tony McGowan** (West Point) spoke of Melville's "reliquary reformations" or his impatience with secular hagiography which he saw as an unnecessary worship of representative men. His main subject matter was the treatment of Horatio Nelson in *Billy Budd*. McGowan argued that the Nelson passages in the manuscripts – notably their place and arrangement across the genetic text – were important to the representations of other characters. He then expanded on the importance of the visual qualities of *Billy Budd*, including the aesthetic reification of the eponymous character equated to a jewel block in the story. Showing paintings linked to the text, he insisted on "The Death of Nelson," a painting by Benjamin West, which is hinted at in the text but is also figured by the process of ekphrasis.
- 39 **Yuji Kato** (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) accounted for Melvillean transplantations in contemporary cultures, looking at *POLA X* by Leos Carax, and *Death by Water* by Kenzaburo Oe. Leos Carax's reading of the character of Pierre, according to Kato, lays out the mythical dimensions of the said character, and transgresses time and place, entwining socio-cultural and political contexts. Both adaptations were made with autobiographical, national, and inter-cultural refigurations which gave a new perspective to the legacy of Melville and his characters. They highlight the ambiguities of the protagonists but also help us see Melville through a plurality of perspectives. Carax's vision of a character like Pierre illustrates the irreconcilability of forces at work in the original text; Oe's novel works with a similar heterogeneity showing the relevance of a 19th century setting in a contemporary context.
- 40 The numerous and variegated ways of assessing Melville in 2019 have shown us the still blooming energies fueling the study of an author of capital importance in our current days of climatic change and burning social issues. Numerous pathways are still to be charted within Melvillean studies two hundred years after the author's birth – such is the bright and hopeful perspective these three days will have shown.

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