

Introduction

Melville Lives

DO NOT CALL ME ISHMAEL. My role in writing this book about the annual *Moby-Dick* Marathon reading—a nonstop, twenty-five-hour immersion in Melville’s novel—may echo that of Ishmael aboard the *Pequod*. Like him, I am both a participant and an observer, deeply absorbed in the rituals unfolding and fully wedded to the task of retelling them in all their complexity, mystery, and dynamism. But I do not intend to speak with his voice, channel his spirit, narrate his story. Instead of playing the role of Ishmael, or Melville, for that matter, like Hal Holbrook’s lifetime of Disney-esque Mark Twain impersonations, I am interested in finding the Melville who lives today through *Moby-Dick* as showcased in the marathon readings of 2009 and earlier. Rather than serving up “cold pork,” as Charles Olson says in *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) while discussing the economic history of whaling in his now classic prose-poem homage to *Moby-Dick*, *Chasing the White Whale* attempts to weigh, from an insider’s vantage point, the *Moby-Dick* Marathon reading—among the most significant events in contemporary print culture—“in the scale of the total society.”¹

It was with trepidation that I traveled, in 2009, to meet with the disciples of Melville; if their obsession were anything like Melville’s, this would be an intense crew. As John Bryant, a regular attendee and editor-in-chief of *Leviathan*, the journal of the Melville Society, remarked, “God knows how many lunatics are out there doing this.”² My initial apprehension would quickly transform to a new appreciation for Melville’s influence on New England culture and on the lives of nonacademic aficionados. I met Nephi Tyler, waterfront worker and son of a southern transplant navy man, who wore on his sleeve his admiration for his father’s participation in the reading. Theirs was more than an ordinary obsession; the novel was built into the fiber of their souls. I learned of how Tyler’s father, who had sculpted whales as a hobby for

years, held aloft his greatest creation in a ritual dedication of an antebellum house his other son had rebuilt. Another reader, Mark Wojnar, his obsession for Melville reaching beyond the reasonable, deemed the marathon a greater priority than steady employment, as his attendance at the event was more consistent than his luck on the job market. Wojnar is a man for whom little else matters than Melville, his wisdom of *Moby-Dick* so profound as to win the praise of Melville's great-great-grandson Peter Whittemore as well as the dean of Melville scholarship, Hershel Parker.

People like these are not in it for literary amusement or diversion. The experience of reading the full novel over nearly twenty-five hours is not for the faint of heart, nor does it lend itself to pretension or superficiality. Like an athletic marathon,³ there is no way to fake it. Like pursuing the whale itself for months on end, reading and listening to twenty-five hours of *Moby-Dick* is equal parts heaven and hell. It becomes a communal experience with the potential for transcendence, a sort of group meditation with language. No reader is here for self-promotion. The objective, rather, is to function as a vessel for the palpitating spirit of Melville. Readers tune in to the music of Melville's soul in the guise of the enigmatic force of vitality that is *Moby-Dick*, the product of one of America's greatest writers surging at the very height of his powers. Here is not so much an intellectual feast, nor a series of one-act plays performed by the top brass of Melville scholarship. Instead the reading is a democratic chorus of voices, crossing national and gender lines with the same manic radical equality as the novel itself. Readers represent a Whitmanian song of occupations, including professors, fishermen, schoolteachers, selectmen, students, journalists, legislators, physicians, and clergy of all denominations. Each reading showcases a world of voices and languages, as selected passages are read in Portuguese, Japanese, Italian, Danish, Spanish, or French, followed by that same passage in English to reflect both the crew's cultural diversity and the global sweep of the *Pequod's* voyage.

The *Moby-Dick* Marathon is part of Melville's surging cultural relevance today, something well chronicled in the extracts of references to him compiled in the preface of Andrew Delbanco's *Melville: His World and Work*. Melville has been referenced everywhere from "The Sopranos" television series to political commentaries on terrorism to *Mad* magazine.⁴ More recently, *The Onion* ran a gag under the heading "Stockwatch," complete with graph from the New York Stock Exchange, reporting "New England Whaling Ltd. (NEWH) up \$0.39 to \$5.20 (up 8.11%)," with the caption: "After 150 years of record lows,

stock prices have begun to rebound as whale oil once again becomes a relatively affordable energy source.”⁵ The joke touches on New Bedford’s steep decline, since its whaling glory days of the 1840s when it was referred to as Whaling City, into economic irrelevance.

New Bedford had begun to mine its whaling past for economic purposes as early as 1922 with the world premier of *Down to the Sea in Ships*, a silent film set in 1850 during the golden age of whaling that attempts to capitalize on the modernist renaissance of Melville. In response to its 1990s economic plight, the city hatched a plan to attract tourist dollars by incorporating the area’s history into such events as the marathon. In 1996, thirteen blocks of the oldest section of town became the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park run by the National Park Service.⁶ The park stretches from the docks through a residential area that includes nearly a hundred homes that had belonged to the antebellum whaling elite. Among them is 100 Madison Street, owned by Melville’s sister in the 1860s and now a bed-and-breakfast. On January 3, 1997, the city and the National Park Service held the inaugural marathon reading that marked New Bedford’s greatest effort to make whaling history its main tourist industry. Of course, the menacing inns, like Peter Coffin’s, the seedy brothels, and gaming houses are conspicuously absent from the park, while the town’s material wealth (the mansions) and Christian piety (the Seamen’s Bethel) receive the spotlight. In this sense, New Bedford’s whaling stock has rebounded, as the city has transformed into what Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Middle Eastern nations may become a century from now after our oil reserves vanish.

In academic culture, Melville’s significance continues to loom large and is actually growing. The establishment in 1999 of Bryant’s *Leviathan*—a much-needed expanded, improved, and sophisticated revamping of the patchwork newsletter *Melville Society Extracts*—is only one example.⁷ The Melville Society represents the cutting edge in academic research on the author, reaching into new areas such as oral storytelling culture in Mary K. Bercaw Edwards’s *Old Cannibal Me: Spoken Sources in Melville’s Early Works* (2009), cultural geography in “*Whole Oceans Away*”: *Melville and the Pacific* (2008) edited by Jill Barnum, Wyn Kelley, and Christopher Sten, and new approaches to the White Whale by editors Bryant, Edwards, and Timothy Marr in “*The Ungraspable Phantom*”: *Essays on Moby-Dick* (2006). The Melville Society is indeed at the heart of the *Moby-Dick* Marathon reading, and their representatives set the tone most years with a lecture that opens the festivities. Their contribution

is indeed immeasurable. These scholars are constantly refreshing and invigorating approaches to both the novel and the author with energy and imagination that keeps Melville alive and relevant in ways that have inspired the mass readership.

With Melville firmly rooted in both popular and academic culture,⁸ his relevance is readily apparent. But why is it that both professionals (literary critics, educators, curators, creative writers) and amateurs (bibliophiles or “fans”) feel moved to conduct a relay reading of *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s longest, most ambitious, and most difficult novel? As many American literature instructors have asked themselves in their desire to teach Melville’s best prose, wouldn’t it be easier to do *Billy Budd*? Is this event, especially for those who remain for the full twenty-five hours of it, “an appropriate occasion for self-discipline in the blessed virtue of patience,” as one reviewer noted of the more dutiful listeners at a Melville lecture on the South Seas delivered in 1858?⁹ *Moby-Dick* is anything but sedate, somber, or reverent; reflective meditation is consistently shattered in the novel by the cry, “There she blows!” It exudes the threat of fatal, disastrous results, as in the chapters “The Line,” “The Monkey-rope,” and “The Mast-Head.” For those who love it, the novel is frolicsome, rambunctious, and irreverent, much like the forty-barrel bull whales, or undergraduates on spring break, giddy with the future in their eyes: “Like a mob of young collegians, they are full of fight, fun, and wickedness, tumbling around the world at such a reckless and rollicking rate.”¹⁰ How can one witness a breaching whale indifferently or not be inspired by the audacious bravado, the sheer exuberance of a writer who rises and swells with his subject, exclaiming, “Give me a Condor’s quill! Give me Vesuvius’s crater for an inkstand!”¹¹

The *Moby-Dick* Marathon reading, thankfully, is not on the syllabus; its sheer force of energy seems to rise in direct proportion to its distance from formal education. Now that the novel is no longer a staple of the undergraduate curriculum and has all but vanished from high schools—where things of beauty too frequently turn into torture devices—it seems that America has now found a new passion for Ishmael’s tale. The marathon reading is not required by anyone or any institution (although one blogger suggested that it should be after attending the 2008 reading). Most colleges and universities do not give travel funds to faculty who want to read at the event, let alone attend it, for it does not squarely fit into any of the boxes of the holy academic trinity of teaching, research, and service. It does not present itself as a lucrative

enterprise.¹² Any spinoff merchandising opportunities have been taken by the New Bedford Whaling Museum gift shop to go directly into its nonprofit mission. The event is as removed from commercial culture as one can imagine; it is not a purchased experience, and thus has even greater value.

Ironically, much of *Moby-Dick* is a meditation on money and its power to motivate, inspire, and corrupt. "The Doubloon" is especially effective at illustrating the wide-ranging interpretations of capital in light of money's universal appeal, totally unavoidable yet nearly limitless in types of value ascribed to it. The economy of the marathon reading is more a communal literary journey than an entertainment passively consumed. Audience members may be asked, for example, to replace readers who have slept through their assigned passages in the wee hours of the night. The reading can be nonetheless, in the language of the academy, *performative*, though mildly so, with a costumed Ishmael, Father Mapple, and Ahab performing set pieces from "Loomings," "The Sermon," and "The Quarter-Deck," along with a lighthearted children's theatrical staging of "Midnight, Forecastle." No one passes a hat or requests compensation, as the rewards are intrinsic to the readers' voluntary—not forced or dutiful—participation. The management style at New Bedford is dedicated to a non-compulsory feel, with audience and readers free to come and go as they like in a way that is consonant with Ishmael's own wayward flair. In deep accordance with the spirit of Ishmael (who chides how that "urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvelous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! How cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition!"),¹³ no exorbitant ticket prices or merchandising mar this otherwise noncommercial event.

Without a commercial or even professional purpose that might serve to justify the uncommon rigor of the event, one is pressed to explore the deeper reasons for its devout following. There is an identifiable groundswell of interest in radical subversive authors, as seen in the recent films *Trumbo* and *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*. The subjects of both films were countercultural warriors wrestling with military, police force, and political integrity with every bit of the wit and force of Melville's assault on missionaries and the hypocrisies of organized religion. For example, in *Moby-Dick* Queequeg embodies and lives by a set of core values, with far more integrity than those of the most traditionally religious characters in the novel, such as the cowardly and noncommittal Starbuck and the ruthless capitalists Peleg

and Bildad. In fact, Melville's assault on Christianity played a hand in the destruction of his fiction-writing career, evidenced by how the antireligious content of *Pierre* (1852) appalled Evert Duyckinck, his longtime friend and editor, and led Duyckinck to withdraw his support for the author. Melville's "quarrel with fiction," as Nina Baym has called it, is as important as *Melville's Quarrel with God*, the focus of Lawrence Thompson's 1952 work, as formal religion and fictional genre conventions were only two of the sacred cows he subverted in his career. Domesticity and gender were among his other favorite targets.

Beyond Melville's appeal as a literary outlaw, the popularity of a marathon reading of Melville's magnum opus demands investigation. Nearly absurd and without clear purpose in its practical dimensions, the reading defies even the literary-critical reflection that *Moby-Dick* invites, demands, and thrives upon. Twain would laugh at the folly of the marathon reading of *Moby-Dick*, just as he would at the prospect of running 26.2 miles for "exercise." But like the athletic marathon from which this reading borrows its name, the participants come to learn about themselves and their world through a common pursuit enacted and celebrated in a ritual that crystallizes and concentrates through a communal gathering a pursuit that is otherwise solitary—the reading of this gigantic novel—for the purpose of witnessing together its majesty and power to move us, change us, make us grow, and to reflect on our former selves who may have encountered it in the past.

A group reading of *Moby-Dick* is well suited to the innumerable interpretations the book invites and even subverts. Given its depth, each reader and listener perceives a different novel beyond its bare plot line. As such, the reading is a ritual celebration of diversity and its delicate balance with individualism, concepts prominently figured in the novel itself. The chorus of voices brings out the living human bonds contained within the text. By making the novel come alive in an active reading, *Moby-Dick* and Melville himself are reanimated and reified. Indeed, many people come to the reading optimistic that the range and depth of the novel's vision might extend to them. Like Ishmael, audience members and readers frequently expect nothing less than to "see the world" through the experience. "Now then," Peleg asks Ishmael prior to shipping aboard the *Pequod*, "thou not only wantest to go a-whaling, to find out by experience what whaling is, but ye also want to go in order to see the world?" Ishmael nods. "Well then, just step forward there, and take a peep over the weather-bow," quips Peleg, roundly disabusing

him of his romantic idealism. “But go a-whaling I must,” Ishmael affirms,¹⁴ a romantic at heart, like those who attend the reading in spite of all reason—“but you’ve read it before,” or simply, “why?” the uninitiated protest—and Peleg agrees to ship him.

Some deep, mysterious longing brings us here to see the novel in a different light, to hear its voice spoken in myriad fresh voices, and to feel the full manic narrative wave of the most ambitious American novel ever composed. Peter Whittemore, a theologian, acknowledged in 2000 that he loves “meeting with people who are so entranced by Melville that they come to a meeting like this in an age when the Internet and TV has made reading look like an old-fashioned habit.”¹⁵ Such is the feel of the marathon, a postmodern reading event with roots in antebellum oratory (Father Mapple’s sermon is read in the historic Seamen’s Bethel, a chapel across the street from the museum) and in an ancient whaling industry that paradoxically careens toward the future with the momentum and force of the White Whale himself. The history of the event itself speaks to the readings as comprising the most significant movement outside of formal criticism to accommodate Melville—not as charming nostalgia, but as more urgently relevant to our contemporary world—in literary history at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Etymology: Origins of the Moby-Dick Marathon

THE ORIGINS of the *Moby-Dick* Marathon point to the excitement and magic behind the founding of the event. In 1986, Jan Larson, Director of Museum Education at Mystic Seaport (Mystic, Connecticut), started the *Moby-Dick* Marathon. She was familiar with the *Ulysses* marathon readings¹⁶ and decided that Mystic Seaport and its abundance of whale-history finery would set the perfect stage for a nonstop reading of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Mystic Seaport, in fact, is home to the most authentic and last surviving American wooden whaling vessel in the world, the *Charles W. Morgan*, the one ship in the world today that most closely resembles the *Acushnet*, on which Melville actually sailed. The fact that Melville never set foot on the *Charles W. Morgan* was thus easily overcome by the ship’s historical fidelity to a whaling schooner, a “mystical three dimensional environment where we can put these words back into the wood,” as Larson described it in 2001.¹⁷

The reading blossomed into four sessions over as many days, as the group began moving to areas of the ship corresponding to scenes in the novel. Larson

later obtained permission to host the group aboard the ship overnight. The Mystic Seaport reading is held annually on the last day of July, finishing on August 1 to commemorate Melville's birthday. In a sugary finish that speaks to Mystic Seaport's more commercial venue (as compared to the one at the New Bedford Whaling Museum), readers share a White Whale birthday cake. These readings became so popular that crowds pressed the *Charles W. Morgan* beyond its capacity of thirty-three; reservations are now required for overnight berths. Five years after the first reading, Jack Putnam, a Mystic Seaport educator, donned a Herman Melville costume and cavorted about the reading rendering his best impersonation of the great author. Groton school children in a remedial reading program attended one year, and sign language was provided by interpreters from a local school for the deaf.¹⁸ Based on its summer schedule and Mystic Seaport's success as a well-advertised major tourist attraction in the area, Mystic's reading continues to thrive under the direction of Mary K. Bercaw Edwards.

In 1996, New Bedford Whaling Museum volunteer Irwin Marks noticed something amiss about the Mystic Seaport nonstop reading. "Mystic Seaport does this to celebrate Melville's birthday," he said, "and I got to thinking about how Melville has absolutely no connection to Mystic, whereas New Bedford *is* Melville."¹⁹ Pioneering and ingenious as it was to put the words back into the wood of the *Charles W. Morgan*, Marks thought it would be more appropriate to put the words back into the streets of New Bedford, since so much of *Moby-Dick* takes place in and ruminates upon that town, which by 1841 had just eclipsed Nantucket as the whaling capital of the world.²⁰ "This is where he came to ship out, this is where he worshipped in Seamen's Bethel. He wrote a whole chapter ['The Street'] in which he lauds the city of New Bedford," Marks noted.²¹ With historical rationale and justification in place, January 3 became the Whaling Museum's adopted date for the reading, to more directly link the event to the *Acushnet* and thus to *Moby-Dick's* and the author's history. On that date in 1997 nearly 150 volunteer readers, led by a costumed Ishmael played by former assistant district attorney Raymond Veary, carried the inaugural event to its completion more than twenty-five hours later.

Veary would continue to intone the famous first words of "Loomings," "Call me Ishmael," through the thirteenth annual reading in 2009. While there is a place for the summer camp atmosphere of remedial readers and birthday cakes — "It gets hot. It rains. Bugs come," as Mystic's Melville impersonator

Jack Putnam said²²—*Moby-Dick* also deserves a more sophisticated reading, and it has found just that in New Bedford. With the emphasis on the town's proud whaling history, which made it the wealthiest city per capita in America in the 1840s and whaling the third largest industry in the U.S. by 1850, it was fitting that the Mayor of New Bedford, Scott Lang, read at the event, a tradition that continues today.²³ Economically, New Bedford may never be as prosperous as it was during the glory days of whaling in the two decades before the Civil War, but beyond the civic significance, of course, is the national importance of this reading that celebrates one of America's greatest authors. There, in 2008, to represent the federal government, was a reading by congressional Representative Barney Frank and a video address from Senator Edward M. Kennedy. Frank would make a return appearance, fashionably late—or “notoriously” so, as one staffer scoffed—in 2009. As the only openly gay member of Congress, Frank had the luck of being assigned to read from Ishmael and Queequeg's awkward roommate scene featuring the cannibal's phallic pipe as its central image, a slice of vintage Melvillian gender folly skewering conventional notions of masculinity.

The whaling town would eventually win out over the authentic whaler as the best setting for a nonstop reading among Melville aficionados. But Mystic Seaport continues its reign as repository of some of the world's best historical maritime artifacts and is distinguished for its exceptional pioneering creativity in initiating the first mass reading of the novel in the U.S. The Mystic reading, like New Bedford's, showcases *Moby-Dick* as a representative of whaling history in general rather than Melville's career. In terms of emphasizing Melville's authorship and the novel's literary composition, a case could also be made for conducting the reading at Arrowhead, Melville's Pittsfield, Massachusetts, country home in the Berkshires, where he wrote the novel in full view of Mount Greylock between 1849 and 1851. This landlocked setting, however, would do little for the history of *Moby-Dick*'s maritime world. The family drama and attendant trauma would likely take center stage; one could imagine a costumed Lizzy Melville and daughters in this case, banging on the door, demanding that Herman obey reason, pull himself out of his obsessive trance, and come down for supper—all while the reading droned on into the wee hours of the night.

There are many histories to this fine book, and Melville's herculean effort to write *Moby-Dick* is certainly one of them. Like the whaling history that undergirds the tale, Melville's personal history does not bespeak the ordinary.

He often locked himself in his room without food, writing in a creative white heat until evening, when his wife and daughters would admonish him to return to the land of the living. The marathon reading itself defies ordinary reason as well. We are supposed to sleep; we are *not* supposed to read nonstop a novel of this length and depth. The history of *Moby-Dick* is the history of such obsessions, which can either be enhanced or muted by the setting of the reading. Museums and libraries provide ideal portals for time travel into Melville's world, much more so than bookstores. An exception would be Canio's Bookstore in Sag Harbor, a historically significant locale for *Moby-Dick* that has hosted nonstop readings. Other hosts include the John Jermain Memorial Library and the University of Kansas, which by contrast are noncommercial public institutions outside of the inexorable web of the marketplace. But unlike the Whaling Museum, these sites have little historical significance to the book. The various locations of the readings bring out particular dimensions of the novel. One site is not more "real" than another; the issue represents an intriguing study in the conundrum of accuracy in literary history: Which site is more true to the spirit of Melville's novel? Of all of them, New Bedford holds a special place in the hearts of dedicated Melvillians.

The first I learned of the New Bedford reading was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at a bookstore on Harvard Square. I was buying, among other things, Giles Gunn's edited volume on Melville, as well as what appeared to be a local product (an unwieldy dissertation) on Melville bearing the imprint of "Queequeg Press" (I couldn't resist). After ringing up my purchases, the shopkeeper took note of my selections and fixed me with his eye like "The Prophet" in *Moby-Dick* and asked, "Have you been to New Bedford?" I looked up, puzzled.

"The Reading? Have you been?"

I shook my head.

"Ohhh . . .," he said, knowing precisely my fate as a smile spread across his bearded face.

As he continued to talk, I heard my fate spelled out before me, and I knew in my bones I must go. The only worry I had was that there might be someone impersonating Melville at the event. (A colleague recently asked just how a Melville impersonator should act. Depressed?) I couldn't dissociate the idea of a Melville impersonator from the image of a paid actor playing the part of Jesus at the Holy Land theme park in Orlando, Florida, who signs autographs, leads the parade (cross in tow), gets abused by nasty Romans, and does the

full “character encounter” circuit. Perhaps I had also been accosted too frequently by “Will,” the Shakespeare impersonator at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. Luckily, I found out that no one would be impersonating Melville at the reading in New Bedford.

Witnessing an actor playing an author may also strike too close to home because my academic research speciality is the professionalization of American authorship, which engages, among other things, the branding of authors as products for sale. I assume that an author has to be dead in order to be impersonated, otherwise actors would be turning up as Stephen King. Yet only classical writers are impersonated, thus it would seem that beyond a place in the *Norton Anthology* perhaps impersonation is the true sign of an author’s literary merit, the ultimate canonization in the pop-cultural zeitgeist. Melville himself knew that commercial culture makes every author to some extent an author impersonator. He despised sitting for daguerrotypes²⁴—the antebellum equivalent to the publicity head shot—a view he made clear both in an angry letter to Duyckinck and in his portrayal of Queequeg’s business of peddling shrunken heads in *Moby-Dick*. The prospect of someone “playing” him would only play into his sense of the sham of professional identity. Melville thus anticipated Kurt Vonnegut’s postmodern observation that “We are what we pretend to be. So we should be careful what we pretend to be.”²⁵ Writing, Melville excelled at; impersonating an author, he could have been arrested for.

So if I would admittedly have drawn an arbitrary line at author impersonators, but willingly accepted, say, actors in the roles of *Moby-Dick* characters, how could I possibly justify attending a nonstop reading of this novel, which presents itself as outrageous, impossible, lunatic, and a little silly? It is a state of mind that says anything is possible, a challenge, a dare to read perhaps the greatest novel of all time in just one day. Nonsense, yes, but worthy and wonderful nonsense all the same, as the event, like its athletic counterpart, typifies these ennobling quotes in praise of human aspiration: “I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate himself by a conscious endeavor,” Henry David Thoreau writes;²⁶ “Competitive running,” like this nonstop reading, “is a metaphor for the unrelenting aspiration of the human spirit,” says Roger Robinson; Ahab’s gnashing, frenzied spirit rings out in Bill Rogers’s claim that “successful marathoners have to lose their cool, and allow this irrational, animal consciousness to take over”; “Racing,” like this reading, “is where I have to face the truth about myself,”

Joe Henderson proclaims; and the ultimate justification for embracing this nonlinear event comes from Clarence Demar's *Marathon*: "Do most of us want life on the same calm level as a geometrical problem? Certainly we want our pleasures more varied with both mountains and valleys of emotional joy, and marathoning furnishes that."²⁷

Charting a Course

"I LOVE ALL men who *dive*," Melville said once in a letter praising Emerson. Like the sea, at its greatest depths, the pressure is immense in *Moby-Dick*. Most Melvillians, like hardcore distance runners, do not view their marathon reading activities as a frivolous pastime but as an ancient obsession born out of necessity and survival in antiquity—a hunt, after all, for a vital resource—and linked to the advancement of civilization. They are "thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began."²⁸ However many nonacademic or "fannish" participants there might be at the reading, they are not light readers, just as the Colorado cross-country team members are not joggers out for lighthearted amusement. Professional academics, furthermore, can actually do better work when they apply their scholarly knowledge to the activities and events of author societies. The study of print culture and book history, if done honestly, demands immersion into our own contemporary, even popular, culture.²⁹ The reading stands as one of the best examples of "town vs. gown" cooperation, showcasing the continuity between classical literature and the lives of real readers.

To this end, I view the readers in this event on equal footing, honoring the wisdom of the Melville Society's academic experts along with noncredentialed readers, and indeed, I seek to find links between professional and amateur reactions to the text. I am not theoretically wedded to any one critical perspective but instead draw from a variety of passionate readings of the novel regardless of paradigm. Hard-core runners and Melvillians congregate in clans and operate according to an ethos, bordering on obsession, largely impenetrable to the mass public. Commitment to the chase and relentless obsession bind Melville's disciples into distinct subcultures that define themselves according to their relation to text, echoing the very characters of *Moby-Dick* itself. The typical *Moby-Dick* Marathon reader attends in order to look into the eyes of and hear the voices of others with utter sincerity and commitment (in a world where these qualities are becoming increasingly scarce) to this

voyage, to keeping the wakeful living nightmare—dreamed in Pittsfield in 1850 in full view of the white snow hill of Mount Greylock—vibrating with the fear, weariness, love, obsession, vitality, and insane dreams of this novel. The reading does not fit into the practical commercial world of print culture. Neither did *Moby-Dick* fit into the career plans or mass market poised to receive Melville's work. The reading is an anomaly, as is the novel itself, along with its herculean process of composition.

Just as the prospect of running a marathon is difficult to explain to non-runners, explaining the enthusiasm for and deep significance of this event to nonbelievers is nearly impossible. To the uninitiated, no explanation will suffice, as the Zen saying goes, and to the initiated, no explanation is necessary. Experience is the best teacher to achieve that objective.

Just as Ishmael's malaise is remedied by going to sea and befriending Queequeg, and thus escaping from the disembodied, commodified, and restrained world of land, the reading is not a purchased experience; it is physical, free (aside from the nominal museum admission), and inclusive. As such, it evades the culture's movement toward the increasingly abstract, disembodied human interactions dominated by the Internet, the most common of which is online payment, perhaps the most conspicuous of our civilized hypocrisies and bland deceptions.

The New Bedford reading offers a novel alternative to such alienating, isolated consumption. The novel itself reaches outward, away from such common practices associated with land, in a series of searches—both physical and intellectual—striving toward meaning or belief, that are constantly undercut. Sometimes that idealism is fulfilled, sometimes cruelly dashed, at a particular reading. The reality of a live reading is that one's favorite segment has an equal chance of being read terribly, or read by a child, or read by a person who races through the passage or butchers its pronunciation, or by someone who gets cadence and tone just right, in a perfect Massachusetts accent cut with a gravelly brogue that conjures up the creaking wood and the salty sea spray of waves battering the bow.

Everyone's stake in the reading is linked to that individual's claim for the leviathan himself. What do readers and listeners seek in him? What does the reading confirm about the world and ourselves? Answers to these questions reflect on the White Whale as the embodiment of good or evil, on the juxtaposition between Ishmael's reflective thinking, his loomings, and Ahab's business of charting and chasing *Moby-Dick* on iron rails. All of the

participants present seek some aspect of the novel we have known and expect to encounter again, call it a *fast fish*—a scene, an image, a turn of phrase, a metaphysical riff, a key speech, or an interaction between characters. We are all still nonetheless open to what we call the *loose fish*—the unexpected surprises; the illuminations along the way; the new meanings in brit, ambergris, or the work of the specksynder which we may have overlooked before. The experience of the reading thus necessarily avoids, even while offering the narrative pleasures of, an absurdist pursuit where, like Ishmael's first whale chase, all are randomly tossed from the boat. We are like Ahab, waiting for something that we know will arrive, something we remember from our private readings, a life-altering encounter we are revisiting. "Hast seen the White Whale?" is Ahab's mantra through the last third of the novel. Indeed, we all have faced the Whale before and must now, deep in the frosty January night, find him once again. Presentiment reigns. What will he do to us now? How will he affect us in this moment? He changed our lives at least once; will he do it again today?

Much of *Moby-Dick* is inscrutable. Salman Rushdie has said that the novel is a condemnation of fundamentalism, and indeed, absolutist definitions destabilize under Ishmael's scrutiny throughout the novel. "Herman Melville delves into these dark waters," he writes, "in order to offer us a very modern parable: Ahab, gripped by his possession, perishes; Ishmael, a man without strong feeling or powerful affiliations, survives. The self-interested modern man is the sole survivor; those who worship the whale—for pursuit is a form of worship—perish by the whale."³⁰

I asked the marathon readers about ambiguity and inscrutability in the text and in the world today. What do readers do with allusions they are not familiar with? Do they search for resolution, pursue further inquiry, or do they prefer the mystery? Does the reading ready them to dig deeper, like Ishmael's probings into Queequeg's past in "Biographical"? To puzzle over the text's ambiguities (the painting in the Spouter Inn, the markings on the whale in "The Blanket") that riddle the interconnected web of transnational contemporary issues of the oil business, terrorism, war, and technology? How, if at all, could a live, continuous reading support a text which demands both quiet reflection—"you cannot run and read it,"³¹ Melville said—and rereading of it in context of the broader questions of our contemporary world? The challenge is there: "Read it if you can," Ishmael says of the Whale's brow.³² But at this pace, an appreciation for minute nuance can only be fleeting.

This is the cost of a new appreciation for the work as an organic whole, for its unifying narrative sweep, for its interconnected chapter clusters and embedded closures.

Many readers bring their own copy of *Moby-Dick* to the reading, clutching it close with spiritual adhesion, holding it as if it were the Bible. Not just any edition, but one that is annotated, marked with the tracks of their lives, bearing various inks and handwritings, observations and responses reflecting the different phases of their lives. It is comfortable, worn in, an extension of themselves. I cradle my tattered 1980 Signet paperback Brentano's Bookstore copy purchased in San Francisco with my father when I was thirteen, my window into the world, my courage-teacher. *Moby-Dick* is a frank and subtle confrontation of the chaos and absurdity of our existence, a novel that refuses the option of shutting down the senses, but rather, inspires us to keep them more acute, more attuned for insight, transcendence, "for wonders supernatural without dying for them," as in the blacksmith's own luminous self-discovery that rescues him from self-annihilation.³³

The desire to talk back to Melville is social, not solipsistic; the embodied marathon reading, though it does not allow critical intrusion into the narrative flow, still ritualizes the opposite energies of Ahab, whose speech is consistently confessional and self-referential. To bear witness to the novel as a whole is to do something akin to Ishmael's project. Both bear witness to something of profound significance, and rather than carry that weight in silence, they speak it. It is my privilege to be able to speak of the event in this forum of critical and social commentary after taking in Melville's exhausting sweep of all western civilization, which sets up Ishmael's testimony "not as an individual case speaking for a general law," as Eyal Peretz says. Rather, he continues, "it has to establish itself as a witness to the whole history of Western literature, [to its] existence and survival as the keeper and guard of this horrible excess of numerous wounding white events." *Moby Dick*, the whale, speaks as if "the whole of Western literature requires that the entire body of Western literature, in a way, be understood as testifying to *Moby-Dick*."³⁴ For most of us, we have never witnessed another such book; it is to the prospect of embarking on the journey of its discovery that we now turn.