

From Downtown Manhattan to the Bronx. Feliz cumpleaños,

Herman!

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[[INSERT MARTÍNEZ PHOTO #1 HERE]]

Pilar Martínez Benedí. Photo courtesy of Pilar Martínez Benedí.

I had been in New York City before. Like any pilgrim worth her salt, I found my way to Melville's birthplace in Pearl Street during my first stay, where I saw the commemorative plaque and bronze bust that, as Jennifer Baker reminded us during a storm-defying walking tour of Melville's lower Manhattan, mysteriously disappeared overnight a couple of years ago. But I must confess, I had never visited Melville's resting place in Woodlawn Cemetery. This visit, when I was in town to attend the Twelfth International Melville Conference held in his hometown during the bicentennial year of his birth, seemed the ideal occasion to pay my overdue respects.

So up to the Bronx I went on a warm morning in late June. I was talking on the phone in Italian when I entered the cemetery to be welcomed by a friendly concierge willing to show me around. "I'm looking for Herman Melville's tomb," I said. "Herman Melville!"—he seemed genuinely taken aback—"Why, two people came earlier this morning looking for him—foreigners too! What's up with that fellow lately?" I told him about the bicentennial and the

Melville conference, to which he responded with a look of disbelief. “You Italian, right? You came all the way from Italy to New York City *only* for Herman Melville?”

Of course he couldn’t imagine the extent to which his inference was accurate. My acquaintance with the Melville Society started indeed in my hometown, Rome, Italy, back in 2011, when I helped Giorgio Mariani run the Eighth International Melville Conference as an MA student. Little could have I imagined at the time that those days of hard work and informal conviviality were the beginning of a fertile journey that would take me from Washington, DC, to Tokyo, London, and finally (for now!) New York City. I wanted to tell my incredulous concierge, Mani, that, like me, several others came all the way “from all the isles of the sea, all the ends of the earth” (from Austria to Japan, from France to New Zealand, from Spain to Uruguay, Argentina, Ecuador, and Nigeria): a veritable Anacharsis Clootz deputation assembled in the insular city of the Manhattoes, not to lay the world’s grievances before any bar, but “only” to talk Melville.

Instead, I simply nodded in assent. He then looked at me—inspected me really: “Well, Melville . . . it’s a walk,” his finger indicating the exact point on a map he’d produced from his pocket, “around a mile.” “That’s fine,” I said nonchalantly. But he frowned, evidently judging me too frail for the hike: “Just let me see what I can do.” Next thing I knew I was in a car with Mani’s colleague, Julian, who kindly agreed to give me a lift. Julian is of Colombian descent, he told me as soon as he learned that I’m actually from Spain, so we naturally switched to our common language as we walked together from the car to the grave, Julian making sure I didn’t get lost.

Julian was as baffled as Mani at the idea of a Melville conference and he of course asked me a version of the question every Melvillean is used to hearing: “What do you guys talk about

for four days?”—meaning (as we defensively imagine) something like: “Can there possibly be anything new to say about that old white man?” With a smug smile, I mentally scanned through the array of innovative angles from which my fellow presenters had looked at Melville texts during the previous week at New York University, and I reflected that this conference has proven, once again, how easy it would be to disabuse him, or any disbeliever, of any notion of exhaustion in Melville studies. I had attended a terrific panel on ecocriticism, heard Timothy Marr’s passionate argument for Melville’s “earthy,” organic creativity, learned about the journalistic roots of his New York revival, seen Melville’s picturesque in terms of the syntax of photography, and participated with Ralph Savarese in a roundtable that, spurred by Meredith Farmer and Jonathan Schroeder, aimed at nothing less than to rethink Ahab. My mind lingered on the Digital Melville panel, with John Bryant, Nick Laiacona, Steven Olsen-Smith, and Christopher Ohge. Thanks to their decennial work, and that of others, the digital has ceased to be an impenetrable terrain for us Melvilleans. Yet it is still awe-inspiring to envision the potentialities of computation. I’m thinking of the colorful wordclouds of the *Billy Budd* manuscript, for instance, or the eye-catching, constellation-like dynamic graph showing stylistic similarities between Melville and the philosophers he read: visual materializations of the digital as a tool to facilitate close readings and generate new research questions from data, as Christopher said during his engaging presentation.

Telling Julian these things in my mother tongue sounded, I suddenly realized, strangely natural and timely. To be sure, a lively polyglotism has characterized all the Melville conferences I have attended so far. But in New York, the Hispanic world seemed to have received unprecedented attention. Wyn Kelly’s terrific inaugural keynote began to trace connections between the Lusophone and Hispanic wor(l)ds, as she uncovered Brazilian

influences on Melville's imagination. The hemispheric approach continued in a rich, energetic (and full to the gunwales!) roundtable on "Melville and Spanish America," co-organized by Emilio Irigoyen and Nick Spengler. In a happy triangulation, the Spanish connection was also transatlantic. I enjoyed immensely Rosa Martinez's fascinating exploration of the Quixotic echoes in "Benito Cereno," as she provocatively invited the audience to glimpse Babo and Don Benito in the cuddy in an old engraving of a mischievous Sancho Panza in the act of shaving his master.

"I should go and give you some privacy now. . . . Un placer hablar con usted!" said Julian after a while as he started for the car. But I was not alone in front of the famous blank scroll for too long. A man in a "Democracy Dies in Darkness" tee appeared to my left. "What's your story?" he asked, but actually rushed to share his with me. His late father, Don McDougall, was an actor. In the 1950s he lost the part of Billy Budd in a Canadian television production to William Shatner. Don died not many years afterwards. He ended up doing radio and the anecdote was part of the family lore. "Can you imagine Captain Kirk as the handsome sailor?! Stupid Star Trek!" he smiled sadly. Funny how a writer, a character, a book may shape one's personal story—and facilitate interpersonal encounters in turn. At the conference I met Francesca Melandri, a successful Italian novelist, who had flown from Rome to NYC "only" to attend the conference: she was not presenting, but I saw her in many panels, taking notes, asking questions. Her mother, Cesarina Minoli, was the second Italian translator of *Moby-Dick*. We chatted over coffee as we looked at a rainy Washington Square from the ninth floor of the Kimmel building. "Melville has always been a shaping presence in my family," her smile was cheerful as she pointed to a at her delicate Polynesian tattoo spreading from neck to earlobe, —which she got,

needless to say, in Nuku Hiva. . . . We will have some more coffee in Rome, where we both live, and resume our chat on language(s), bodies, affects and, as she put it, “our beloved Herman.”