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DAN BEACHY-QUICK

A Whaler's Dictionary

Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2008. xvii + 330 pp.

In *A Whaler's Dictionary*, poet Dan Beachy-Quick has with some courage attempted a fresh reading of *Moby-Dick*. And although this monograph is composed in prose that is not what one would call academic, it is written with a prevailing seriousness—as if its author, unsatisfied by his principal goal (“to write a loving response that includes every thought—coherent or ambiguous, true or frivolous” [xi] that *Moby-Dick* has engendered in him), has contrived a second, perhaps even more difficult task: to produce a book that makes “more possible the reading of a book outside itself” (xiii). *A Whaler's Dictionary* is not just a meditation or a musing, then—not, or not simply, an appealing illustration of what admiring reviewer Lyn Hejinian calls “the charged relationship that can come into being between text and reader.” It is also undisguisedly a work of literary criticism, a book largely concerned with what kind of book *Moby-Dick* itself might be and how it might be read.

A Whaler's Dictionary thus positions itself in the tradition begun by Ronald Mason's *The Spirit Above the Dust* and reinvigorated by Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, critical books prompted by Melville's text and undertaken by writers who would sooner address the lay reader than the professional critic, writers whose authorial drive has less to do with scholarly contribution than with sheer love of the subject. Such books tend to be detailed, enthusiastic, sympathetic and illuminating. They offer readers the layered pleasure of one writer's bold confrontation with another, conveyed in a style that can be described only as an act of exchange, of belonging at once to the inspiring author and to his critic.

At its best, *A Whaler's Dictionary* demonstrates a tenacious application of an imaginative and resourceful intelligence to Melville's extraordinary text. The book is comprised of short, cross-referential, highly associative prose entries that concentrate on themes or issues that Beachy-Quick sees animating *Moby-Dick*. By bringing into proximity terms like “Adam,” “Plato,” “Babel” or “Vengeance,” Beachy-Quick literalizes his desire “to write so as to be within the conversation of another book,” as he reports in an interview for The Poetry Foundation. He chronicles the experience of a writer reading—or, following

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Thoreau, turns “reading” into an encounter, a “form of experience” which occurs, as Beachy-Quick notes in his 2012 book *Wonderful Investigations*, “in some twofold world happening simultaneously in the author’s mind and the reader’s mind with only the thin printed page as conduit between” (111).

But what about Beachy-Quick’s expressed hope that his *Dictionary* makes more possible the reading of the book that inspired it? For though inconsistency is a formal feature of *A Whaler’s Dictionary*, as readers are instructed to cross reference entries that “build upon, expand, tangentially link, or contradict the entry just read” (xiii), Beachy-Quick’s highest expectation for his book is that it will “allow a reader to gain a greater sight of what this leviathan *Moby-Dick* itself might be, and in so doing encourage a closer reading” (xiii). In short, and despite warning his audience that his book “is not responsible,” that “it is not thoroughly researched,” or that it is not meant to be “an addition to the field of scholarship” (xi), Beachy-Quick is centrally concerned with the question of how *Moby-Dick* should be read. He thus exhibits the intentions of the literary critic and raises the expectation that his writing will attend to his subject as a whole: to what *Moby-Dick* is or might be.

A literary critic contrives a view of what we might call Melville’s object in *Moby-Dick*, what sets the work in motion, not to reduce Melville’s untidy spontaneity and dazzling wit to some tedious line of reasoning but because attending to the author’s object or his text in its entirety is what allows the critic to set aside her personal responses—her impulse to use fragments of the text to generate lessons for her own particular uses—and to gain the height from which she may better observe the work in front of her and through this endeavor become a better observer of herself, others, and the world. A critic attends to the details of a book in order to make sense of the totality in order to know what to do with the details. This process is no less true for the critic who is also a poet, since (as Charles Olson was able to show) the feeling that the critic is making a case is what gives his work its radiance. The poet/critic need never give over the associative reading practices or program of intertextuality (the juggling of multiple narrative surfaces that make a work collage-like) that distinguish the writer of poetic sensibilities.

In regard to what Beachy-Quick calls his “highest hope” for his book, then—the new vantage it offers readers of Melville’s novel—*A Whaler’s Dictionary* frustrates. This sense of dissatisfaction arises not solely from the author’s formal reliance on juxtaposition or his practice of letting oblique connection establish its own kind of shimmering logic, but it does feel as though Beachy-Quick’s conception of his book as “an almost erotic entanglement” (xi) between his mind and Melville’s often gets in the way of the far-reaching insights this book might have provided. That is, the *Dictionary*’s series of

interlaced meditations often lead readers away from, rather than nearer to, *Moby-Dick's* motivating logic—what Beachy-Quick names “the white squall of meaning that is *Moby-Dick*” (xiii). Indeed, to suggest that “meaning” in Melville’s novel is tumultuous, the result of furious agitation rather than careful calculation, seems problematic if Beachy-Quick wishes his readers to “gain a greater sight” of *Moby-Dick*. Calling the novel “a white squall of meaning” implies an untraceable relationship between the operative consciousness of the author and the world of the novel. It suggests that the book has no motivating logic and thus that there is no reason to occupy oneself with all of its details.

In those entries that attempt a philosophical investigation of the logic of language (for example, “Accuracy,” “Classification,” “Definition,” “Description,” “Dictionary,” and “Plato”), Beachy-Quick seems to read against the grain of the theorists with whom he avowedly identifies in the introductory note titled “Some Gams (with Books, not Boats)” (xv). More precisely, Beachy-Quick questions the practicality of ostensive definition throughout the *Dictionary*, but he leaves intact the supposition, all but destroyed by Plato, Emerson, Frege, and Wittgenstein (who figure in the list of key thinkers who Beachy-Quick notes influenced his meditations) that grammatology recapitulates ontology, or that there is a logically primeval landscape that later gets reported in language. Thus in “Accuracy,” he writes that “Ishmael’s deepest humanity lies in his understanding that the whale can be described only in the encounter with a living whale—not a place for language but prior to language, and an encounter that language, in its most humble effort toward accuracy, tries to recapture after it has passed” (3). And in “Definition,” he writes that “To classify things of the world, one needs a language. Such a language orders, makes possible classification, gives to the discerning mind the basic elements of its judgments” (56). Melville, in contrast, and in keeping with the logic found in the writing of the theorists named, embraces and radically contributes to the idea that we cannot explain and justify the inner character of language by pointing to the way the world is. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville banishes the notion that the world is semantically structured.

At moments like these, *A Whaler’s Dictionary* feels caught between its poetical and philosophical aspirations. Intellectually the book fails to satisfy when it seems to posit one idea and then, with deliberate disobedience, another. Yet there is no doubt that as an account of its author’s lyrical sensibility, such moments of slippage or contradiction give the text added richness. Much can be gained when the book feels caught in its own echoes or when, by contradicting itself, says something its author would not otherwise have been able to say.

In that sense, what is most enticing about *A Whaler’s Dictionary* is the invitation everywhere in it to catch oneself on a line of thought, something it

is possible to do even if many of the lines fail to reel one in. This ubiquitous promise is part of Beachy-Quick's vision, his confidence that the orphic depth of the text will depend on whether the reader is able to move laterally around its surface. Thus my impatience with the *Dictionary* was calmed by a line from "Thought": "Ahab may not care for dictionaries, and the worded world dictionaries define, but he cares for the page such nonsense is printed on" (278). And the pleasing entry for "Tzimtzum" rewards readers with the reminder that "The first question of the world is Form. The question does not begin with 'what' but with 'how'" (292). Beachy-Quick's fertile entry "Wonder" offers perhaps his truest contribution to Melville studies. After noting how Ishmael's introductory use of the phrase "wonder-world" "echoes mysteriously through all of the pages to come," Beachy-Quick suggests that "although it would be reductive to call *Moby-Dick* a novel of wonder, Ishmael and all aboard the Pequod suffer wonderment, enchantment, and spell, trancelike reverie balanced by horror's gravitational abyss" (307). This insight conjures *Spell*, Beachy-Quick's well-received second book of poetry, a fanciful composition that also engages with Melville's text, registering the fascination of a reader at once cursed and enchanted by his subject. Indeed, it is in his fine sense of what it means to "suffer wonderment" (as when Ishmael "feels simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by" [308] the other-worldly objects in Queequeg's room at the *Sputter-Inn*) that Beachy-Quick renders his best service to *Moby-Dick's* readers. In an entry dedicated to "wonder's work," he writes, "Wonder cleaves. It produces paradoxical effects: creating fear in which one feels no impulse to run. Far from it, the greater the fear one feels, the more entranced by it one becomes—unable to speak, to move, or to act in any way that risks breaking the spell" (308).

Hence what ultimately leaves a stronger impression than Beachy-Quick's analogy of a countermanded dictionary is his deeply felt investigation of the paradox of wonder. Wonder leaves us caught at the mercy of bewildering contradictions. Wonder arrests—and wonder cleaves. But this contradiction is one it is possible, even advantageous, to live with. Thus if "the opposing effect of wonder is to destroy oneself" (309), as Beachy-Quick writes—to obliterate, as it were, the vital experience of sense, to feel one's ability to comprehend the world extinguished, or to feel what Weber calls the disenchantment of the world—then the accompanying effect of wonder must be a kind of re-enchantment with the world, an awakening or transformation of the senses. Toward that end, *A Whaler's Dictionary* has the wind at its back.

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