“Lauding the Inhuman Sea”

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On July 10, 2014, the day after I returned from my leg on the Charles W. Morgan (New Bedford to Buzzards Bay), Bethanie Nowviskie delivered a keynote address at the DH2014 conference in Lausanne, Switzerland. Entitled “Digital Humanities in the Anthropocene,” her talk considered a solemn truth:

I take as given the scientific evidence that human beings have irrevocably altered conditions for life on our planet. . . . We are here to live for a moment as best we can, to do our work, and to help our fellow-travelers muddle through their own short spans of time—but we are also possessed of a knowledge that is sobering and rare. We, and the several generations that follow us, will bear knowing witness to the 6th great extinction of life on Earth.

She ends with a troubling question: “What does that knowledge do to D[igital] H[umanities] in the year 2014? What does it do to our self-conception as humanities computing practitioners?” (http://nowviskie.org/2014/anthropocene/). Although Nowviskie was addressing the DH community, her question aims directly at all who work in the humanities at large. What are we doing about the end of the world?

Mystic Seaport did not have this question on its agenda for the 38th Voyage, but it occurred to me in relation to the poem which I used as my entry point into the Morgan’s journey: Melville’s “Pebbles I,” from his John Marr and Other Sailors:

Though the Clerk of the Weather insist,  
And lay down the weather-law,  
Pintado and gannet they wist  
That the winds blow whither they list  
In tempest or flaw. (NN Published Poems 243)

In my proposal, I related this poem to pedagogy—teaching literature in a new media context as Henry Jenkins and I described in our book, Reading in a Participatory Culture (2013)—and to different modes of encountering a text. Do you ask students to read according to a “weather-law” set down by a distant “Clerk”? Or do you recognize that since “the winds blow whither they list,” one may also read the way pintados and gannets do, submitting to experience and riding the winds? I proposed that my time on board could be spent observing the work of the crew in response to “tempest or flaw”—luckily there
were no tempests that day—as a route to thinking creatively about information media in what Jenkins has called a “participatory culture.” The wind is an information-bearing medium for the gannet or the sailor, I reasoned, and as I watched sailors translate the wind’s messages into action, I saw that idea illuminated in compelling ways.

I also observed participatory culture at work on a small but dramatic scale in the exchange of information relating to my own interests. I had read aloud from “Pebbles I” to Stowaway Ryan Leighton, who interviewed me for the Mystic Seaport archive. Then I asked Cristina Baptista, a fellow-Voyager and speaker of Portuguese, what “pintado” meant to her. She had not heard of the bird, a Cape petrel, but she knew that “pintado” means “painted,” and without her explanation I could not have appreciated how vividly the bird’s black-and-white plumage must appear in a squall. With Hester Blum, another fellow-Voyager, I puzzled over Melville’s use of the word “flaw,” which appears in “Benito Cereno” and “The Bell-Tower” to indicate a defect in a bell, but Hester pointed out how “flaw” also recalls the sound of “flew,” in relation to the birds in the poem, a connection I had not noticed before. Second Mate Sean Bercaw was passing by, and when I showed him the page Cristina, Hester, and I were considering, he noted “gannet”: “It’s a kind of cormorant.” But he did not recognize Melville’s use of “flaw” as a term for a wind, and he thought that the word must have been used in the nineteenth century more often than in recent parlance.

Thus within ten minutes we explored intriguing linguistic, literary, and maritime nuances in Melville’s poem. We also tested different criteria Henry Jenkins suggests for participatory culture, namely that it provide space for sharing collective intelligence, encourage diverse contributions to knowledge, and offer social bonds among people working together on a common project, or in this case, text.

Only when I returned home did I consider the darker implications of “Pebbles,” in particular Melville’s lines describing an “inhuman Sea”:

Implacable I, the old implacable Sea:

Implacable most when most I smile serene—

Pleased, not appeased, by myriad wrecks in me. (“Pebbles V” NN Published Poems 247)

Healed of my hurt, I laud the inhuman Sea—. (“Pebbles VII” NN Published Poems 249)

Melville’s “inhuman” universe resembles Nowviskie’s post-human perspective, and I found it a bracing alternative to a touristic vision of the Morgan’s Voyage. It would be far too easy, in other words, to think of the Voyage as a
nostalgic journey into whaling history, a way of advertising regional museums, or an opportunity to revel in Melville's language on the decks of a whaling ship (although those of us who did so derived great pleasure from it!). We might also remember that Melville's pessimism remains useful in the Anthropocene. Nowviskie urges us to “to live for a moment as best we can, to do our work, and to help our fellow-travelers muddle through their own short spans of time”: exactly the kind of communal labor I saw modeled on the Morgan and in Mystic Seaport's vision of the 38th Voyage. Melville could laud the inhuman sea because he had experienced the participatory culture of sailor communities aboard ships like the Charles W. Morgan.

—Wyn Kelley

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