

The Lyceum Movement

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The lyceum movement was one of the defining cultural forces of mid-nineteenth-century America, a catalyst for reform and an engine for literary creation. Especially for writers in the antebellum North, the popular lecture circuit had become a chief means of gaining exposure and supporting a life of letters. Authors from across the literary spectrum found stints touring the nation's lecture halls a unique means of not only funding their writing, but also coming to know their own changing country, reaching wider audiences and redefining popular ideas of authorship. Herman Melville, however, had a notoriously difficult relationship to the medium. In *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* he depicted lecturing as the arena of charlatans and bores. Yet the medium also mocked Melville in return. Largely out of financial desperation, he had tried his luck as a touring speaker for three brief seasons between 1858 and 1860, but thanks to poor choices of topic and a lack of oratorical polish, his lyceum career proved a disappointment. He barely recouped his costs, met with indifferent reviews from an unmoved public and resigned himself to the fact that the lecture hall would offer him none of the redemption, recognition or reward he so desperately craved.

The turn to the lyceum remains a poorly understood moment in Melville's professional and artistic journey. It is often dismissed as merely a tragic footnote to his literary career. Whereas his poetry and later prose have been rediscovered and revalued, his output for the lyceum is still neglected. Since Merton Sealts compiled the available evidence of Melville's three tours in *Melville as Lecturer* (1957), there has been little engagement with his platform career.¹ Melville merits only a footnote in general surveys of the lyceum movement; his modern biographers have tended to play down the importance of his forays on the lyceum; even those who explicitly consider his relationship with performance culture or with market contexts such as the periodical press, the book trade and civil service avoid an account of the lecture business.² This neglect is symptomatic of

a tendency in scholarship on the period to take the lyceum context for granted as a transparent institution that presented uncomplicated middle-brow entertainment.

There are at least two ways in which the context of the lyceum movement can be used to better understand Melville's work. First, by understanding the place that popular lecturing held in antebellum culture we can more fully grasp his satires of the literary scene, and the particular aesthetics of the lyceum can help us appreciate anew the subtleties of Ishmael's narrative voice in *Moby-Dick*. Second, by examining Melville's own experiments at the lectern, we can see how he re-imagined his output as performance and how the travel lecture genre allowed him to develop a more mature, more critical form of the cosmopolitan persona that had him famous.

The Lyceum and the Travel Lecture

When historians speak of the lyceum movement they are often referring to two quite distinct phenomena.³ In its earliest form, it was a network of adult education institutions devoted to debate and discussion that invited talks from important local figures. It began in the mid-1820s and spread from Massachusetts throughout the small towns of the Northeast. These institutions were intended as ecumenical and nonpartisan spaces in which communities could learn from each other, and useful knowledge could be circulated. In the mid-1830s, Melville became involved in this world through the Albany Young Men's Association for Mutual Improvement, one among many bodies emphasizing knowledge, rhetoric and eloquence to prepare young men for the lower rungs of the urban middle-class workforce.⁴

By the 1840s this network had developed into something quite distinct. The "lyceum" now signified a series of loosely connected institutions that existed primarily to host lectures by prominent traveling speakers from across the nation in seasons that ran from autumn to spring. The early lyceum had become a lecture circuit, and its members less participants than spectators. In 1855 a Boston paper observed, "Every town or village of any sort of enterprise or pretensions has its annual course of popular lectures, while the cities support several courses."⁵ The emphasis might still notionally be on education, useful knowledge and training for commercial life, but there was a new impulse toward entertainment, and the most extravagant and charismatic speakers became national celebrities. Thanks to copious newspaper reportage, the most prominent talks in any given city were often also summarized and reviewed in the press, which created

a large secondary audience for these live events, a multimedia channel through which Americans could speak to more of their fellow Americans than in any other medium.

As Melville attended lectures or read about them, the lyceum would have given him at least three key meanings. First, it signified a unique mode of intellectual theatricality. Lecture halls were both academy and playhouse, as much a part of performance culture as any other staged ritual; a hybridity that Margaret Fuller captured in the phrase “Entertaining Knowledge.”⁶ Just as with other forms of oratory, lyceum speakers were prized not only for their intellect but for more intangible qualities the culture termed “manner.” As a result, lecturing would also have offered an example of celebrity heroism, the nation’s most famous lyceum speakers were turned into cultural idols, including the statesman Daniel Webster, the preacher Henry Ward Beecher, philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson and civil rights leader Frederick Douglass. Finally, to someone as economically attuned as Melville, the lyceum inevitably struck him as merely another hard-nosed marketplace. For an 1850s audience, the standard charge of twenty-five cents for an evening’s entertainment made a night at the lecture an economic sacrifice. For speakers it promised a second and often arduous profession, involving constant movement, erratic transport and accommodation, inclement winter weather and superficial sociality. But it could also pay well. As Beecher wryly put it, celebrity speakers were rewarded with “F.A.M.E.” (“Fifty dollars, And My Expenses”), and during the late 1850s, the most popular might deliver upward of a hundred lectures in a good season and earn five thousand dollars for three months’ work.⁷

Finally, Melville would also have recognized that the key tastes of the lyceum were ones he was uniquely well-placed to exploit. Alongside talks on moral reform, history or literary topics, one of the most enduring popular genres was first-hand accounts of travel. In a culture in thrall to both the exotic and the vocal, travelers were by definition people of consequence, and lecture hall accounts of their experiences were not only reliably uncontroversial but offered one of the most powerful means that audiences might gain insights into distant places and different people. As the reformer and orator Wendell Phillips put it to a Brooklyn audience in 1860, “The system of public lecturing might be considered from one point of view as a great labor-saving machine. One man travels through books and brings back to you the result of his journeying; another travels over the globe and brings back the result of his locomotion.”⁸

These “results” were often presented as part of a multimedia spectacle, with a live narrator accompanying illustrations, magic lantern shows and

panoramas. The repertoire of locations covered in these lectures was eclectic. Perennially popular subjects were locations such as the Holy Land, Western Europe and the developing American West; most attractive of all were the exotic locations of Africa, the Far East and the Arctic. It is no surprise, therefore, that when Melville turned to the lecture hall, he drew upon his own experiences in such far reaches of the globe.

The Role of the Lyceum in Melville's Writings

Before turning to lecture himself, the context of the lyceum had already made its imprint upon Melville's writing as part of his wider critique of mid-century American literary culture. Various satirical references in his fiction of the 1850s reveal a low opinion of the lyceum's shallow grandiosity. A key moment of *Pierre*, for example, centers on the hero's attempts to avoid being sucked into lecturing. "From various quarters of the land, both town and country, and especially during the preliminary season of autumn," Melville tells us, "Pierre received various pressing invitations to lecture before lyceums, Young Men's Associations and other Literary and Scientific Societies." He considers such invites merely part of "marked demonstrations of his literary celebrity" but is strong enough to resist and "conscientiously and respectfully declined all polite overtures."⁹

The chief sense of the lyceum in the novel seems to be of its earnest self-importance. Pierre has earlier been reading a pamphlet of a lyceum piece with the pointedly overblown title of "Lecture First. Chronometricals and Horologicals," and Melville imagines some equally extravagant names for the organizations that approach his hero, such as the "Urquhartian Club for the Immediate Extension of the Limits of all Knowledge, both Human and Divine." When Pierre imagines the context of the lyceum, he imagines a staid conventional scene, "fifty benches . . . With five hundred gray heads . . . it seemed too absurd for thought." The lyceum movement is shown as a toxic confluence of naïve young men and "venerable gray-headed Secretaries," and offers a comic foil to Pierre's more substantial ambitions.¹⁰

More broadly, Melville places lecturers squarely within the tradition of hackwork, with the speakers of the lecture circuit as "those unfortunate fellows . . . who are progressively ashamed of their own successive productions – written chiefly for the merest cash."¹¹ To Melville the popular lecture was simply another form of confidence trick. It is fitting, therefore, that more than a few of the recognizable targets for his *roman à clef* take on the antebellum cultural scene in *The Confidence-Man* are men noted for their lecturing, such as George William Curtis, Ralph Waldo Emerson

and Bayard Taylor. The figure of the lecturer is merely “a soliloquist in a crowd,” and when “the stranger” wants to demean a fellow traveler, he frames his insult in terms of the lyceum: “pray, what society of vintners and old toppers are you hired to lecture for?”¹²

The aesthetics of the lyceum also marked Melville’s fiction on a more profound formal level through the very style of Ishmael’s narration in *Moby-Dick*. The novel’s account of seafaring is patterned throughout by moments of oratory and performed speech. But Ishmael’s essayistic chapters themselves are perhaps the most important oration. Hershel Parker suggests that these sections reflect Melville’s youthful experiences in Albany’s debating societies.¹³ In a recent reading John Evelev has taken this suggestion further, viewing the early part of *Moby-Dick* as a parodic “lecture series on the whale.” The erratic shifts between approach and topic in “Loomings,” “The Advocate” and “The Affidavit” mimic the eclecticism of the lyceum, he argues, and Ishmael’s use of direct address and rhetorical questions “establish exactly the kind of relationship with his readers upon which the antebellum popular lecturers depended.” These tics were in part simply stylistic reference points through which to enlist his readers into a recognizable lyceum mindset of “contemplation and companionship.”¹⁴ But as Evelev makes clear, there was also a broader agenda here about the production of knowledge. In the absurd excesses of his intellectual pursuit of the whale, Ishmael offers up a carnivalesque rendition of both the popular lecture hall diffusion of knowledge and the problem of its reliance upon charismatic performance of discursive authority.

By adopting the style and habits of the lyceum, Melville was able to offer an ironic commentary on the limitations of middlebrow professional ideology. The lyceum was at essence a place one went to to discover how to move up the economic or social ladder, a sense captured in the success of Beecher’s *Lectures to Young Men* (1845). But Ishmael’s lectures offer quite the opposite. He is preaching a form of what Evelev notes to be “downwards mobility,” rejecting urban progress for a life of whaling. The form of the lectures offered the ideal means through which Melville could offer such an iconoclastic social performance. What readers respond to as both bracing and comic in *Moby-Dick* might well have its origin on the lecture stage.

Melville’s First Lyceum Tours

As a younger man, Melville had been quite the charismatic oral performer himself, captivating his circle with accounts of his voyaging.¹⁵ In

the mid-1840s his family had urged him to commit his tales to paper, to great success; a decade later he felt forced to make the reverse journey from print to speech. With family and professional life at crisis point, lecturing seemed like one of the few routes out of this impasse, and he approached his friends to help his entry to the circuit, promising, "If they will pay my expences, & give a reasonable fee, I am ready to lecture in Labrador or on the Isle of Desolation off Patagonia."¹⁶ Melville found himself doing what his character Pierre had not. Over the next three seasons, he delivered three separate lectures in twenty-eight different venues, stretching north to Montreal, west to St. Louis and south to Clarksville, Tennessee.

For his first season he delivered "Statues in Rome," a lecture describing the sculptures he had seen on his recent European tour. Melville adopted the pose of historian and art critic, breathing life into a succession of "mute marbles" to "revive" the stories of these "representatives of the mighty past." The message was a defense of the classical world, aiming to keep "alive in the memory of man by glowing words" the achievements of antiquity. Such classical erudition was a lyceum commonplace, calculated to appeal to elite urban citizens. Yet Melville deliberately undercut his own authority for audiences, announcing himself "neither critic nor connoisseur" and making "no pretension" to "cultivation."¹⁷ There was a clear rhetorical futility to Melville's topic, and even the most gifted of writers might have struggled to entertain audiences in the absence of the visual aids that his more adept lecturing counterparts used.

The response to both content and performance style was mixed. One Ohio reviewer gushed that they "could have sat for hours ... witnessing this skilful and appreciative master of ceremonies taking the robes from the pictured pages of Tacitus and putting them upon the lifeless marbles ... 'til Rome became living Rome again." Others, however, had come expecting tales of cannibals and felt cheated. Above all, audiences were disappointed in the lecturer's platform style, his monotone delivery and lack of eye contact. The *Charlestown Review* thought Melville "particularly dull ... one would hardly have guessed that he had ever been to Italy at all."¹⁸

For his second season Melville returned with "The South Seas," the subject of which was far more likely to appeal to audiences who knew him from *Typee*. Yet as he took this piece through Baltimore, New York and Boston, he frustrated audiences by refusing in his opening words "to read again what had long been in print, touching his own incidental adventures in Polynesia."¹⁹ Rather than touristic description or enticing personal narrative, he offered mere information mixed with outspoken critiques on colonialism, ending with the hope "as a philanthropist" that "these Edens

of the South Seas . . . will long remain unspoiled . . . until we have found for ourselves a civilization morally, mentally, and physically higher than one which has culminated in almshouses, prisons and hospitals.”²⁰ Again, audiences found the experience of Melville at the platform disappointing. In Illinois the Rockford *Register* thought that “lecturing is evidently not Mr. Melville’s sphere. And no man has a right to set himself up as a lecturer at \$50 a night who cannot for one minute take his eyes from his manuscript.”²¹ The Milwaukee *Free Democrat* thought it “a literary effort below mediocrity, and too bookish to please.”²²

It is hard not to see Melville’s lecture career as a failure. The creative accommodation of his endlessly reinventing fiction, finely crafted to meet distinct tastes, seems to have deserted him as he turned to the lyceum. Melville was clearly unable or unwilling to transition from the fireside glow to the glare of lecture hall gaslights. It was a financial disappointment, as well. Even a less energetic, intellectually demanding speaker like Emerson commanded 1,700 dollars for 1856 alone.²³ In Melville’s three seasons, he accumulated only 1,273 dollars, minus expenses, from his first winter, and no lecture association ever invited him back. While his career was no less disastrous than many other forgotten aspiring lecturers, the muted reception he received was in stark contrast to his reputation and prestige.

Recently Zach Hutchins has argued for a revised assessment of Melville’s lyceum misadventures. Rather than simply personal and professional embarrassments, he suggests that we read both their content and provocatively flat performance style as a form of conscious rebuke to the values of the lecture circuit. To Hutchins, Melville in the lecture hall was a form of “philanthropic bait and switch,” overturning rhetorical and conceptual expectations in order to continue the caustic social critiques found elsewhere in his late 1850s writings. Read in this way, his lectures “suddenly seem much more successful enterprises.”²⁴ Such a re-assessment might help us understand the last and most intriguing of his lectures.

Melville’s Lyceum Farewell: Cosmopolitanism as Critique

“Travel, Its Pleasures, Pains and Profits” was the reported name of a text Melville delivered only a handful of times in Long Island and Massachusetts. Though it only appears in one fragmentary report, it remains a fascinating enigma that illuminates the unpursued potential Melville found in using lecturing as part of his evolving persona as social critic of possessive materialism. The piece began with a characteristic blend of travelogue and

philosophical speculation. Using the hills surrounding his Berkshire home for example, he wonders:

Suppose a person should be born there, and know nothing of what lay beyond, and should after a time ascend the mountain, with what delight would he view the landscape from the summit! . . . Every man's home is in a certain sense a "Hopper" which however fair and sheltered, shuts him in from the outer world. Books of travel do not satisfy; they only stimulate the desire to see.²⁵

Opening with this parable of perspective through ascension, the piece seems about to become a straightforward call for cross-cultural cosmopolitanism.

As the lecture continues, it becomes a more complex commentary on the relationship of experience to market forces, a sense that the lyceum context works to amplify. Elsewhere in Melville, insularity is figured in relation to market pressures; most notably the opening glimpse of the "insularity of the Manhattoes" "encased by the surf" of "commerce" in the opening paragraphs of *Moby-Dick*.²⁶ Similarly the cultural relativism of travel is figured throughout Melville's times in terms of loss, as a form of "getting rid" of prejudice. But in this lecture, such ideas are also communicated through the language of profits: "acquisition" and "gain" that lead to "enlargement."²⁷ The lecture contributes to a larger critique about the psychological and social cost of markets, their stimulation of desires, their demand for mobility, their promise of experiences of "delight" and the relationship between the voyage and its consumption.

One way of seeing what Melville was doing here is to compare him with his more successful contemporary writer and lecturer Bayard Taylor. The latter was the most celebrated travel lecturer of the time, and he and Melville occupied curiously similar roles in antebellum culture. Melville's hostility to Taylor is well known: he refused his overtures, spoke ill of him in letters and, some argue, depicted him as figure of "the cosmopolitan" in *The Confidence-Man*. In the late 1850s, both found themselves on the circuit delivering similar pieces theorizing the value of travel. Taylor had been performing "The Philosophy of Travel" since 1855, a lecture in which he explored the "pleasures and profit to be derived from a wide range of experience;" defending "the nobler aims of travel;" and refuting criticisms of cosmopolitanism as an unproductive, "unsettled and unstable" form of manhood.²⁸ By recasting the traveler as craftsman, he reasserts his role as productive economic actor. Taylor's lecture was widely reprinted in the national press during the period Melville was turning to the lyceum. But, just as he was unwilling to follow Taylor in dressing up as Arab or

Muscovite on the lyceum stage, he also used his lecture to distance himself from what he saw as his rival's less reflexive philosophy of travel. By offering a more nuanced appraisal of the effects of travel, Melville offered a rebuke that mixed philanthropy and misanthropy. Travel came to signify the less positive aspects of the market revolution, destructive of not just prejudice or outworn allegiances but the very bonds of social affection.

Standing at the lectern in the commercial arena of the lyceum, Melville was able to draw out these contradictions particularly clearly between possessive materialism and the performative nature of travel testimony. The "Traveling" lecture was thus a disillusioned farewell to Melville's youth, and to a particular economic identity. It reverberates with the recognition that the pursuit which had given him market value – international voyaging – was something he no longer found possible or palatable to execute. And it shows him feeling his way into a new form of cosmopolitan critique in the pose of lecture hall preacher. The very lecturing medium that he had once disdained now allowed him, in its staged rituals and its earnest sense of purpose, a final chance to curse Jacksonian society through one of its iconic institutions.

Notes

- 1 Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville as Lecturer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).
- 2 See, for example, Sheila Post-Lauria, *Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996) and, especially, John Evelev, *Tolerable Entertainment: Herman Melville and Professionalism in Antebellum New York* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).
- 3 For accounts of the lyceum see Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); Donald Scott, "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States," *Journal of American History* 66 (1980), 791–809; Angela Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005); Tom F. Wright ed., *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum: Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).
- 4 See Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- 5 "Popular Lecturers," *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, October 29, 1855.
- 6 [Margaret Fuller,] "Entertainments of the Past Winter," *Dial* 3 (1842), 46.
- 7 Figures refer to Bayard Taylor's earnings for 1854. See Bode, *American Lyceum*, 217.
- 8 "Street Life in Europe," *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 22, 1860.
- 9 *Writings*, vol. vii, 252, 340.

- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid, 252.
- 12 *Writings*, vol. x, 142.
- 13 Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996–2002), vol. i, 98.
- 14 Evelev, *Tolerable Entertainments*, 124–5.
- 15 See, for example, N. P. Willis's account of Melville's charisma in "Los Gringos," *Home Journal*, October 13, 1849 (*Checklist*, no. T221).
- 16 Herman Melville to George L. Duyckinck, December 20, 1858, *Writings*, vol. xiv, 332.
- 17 *Writings*, vol. ix, 399.
- 18 Quoted in Sealts, *Melville as Lecturer*, 132, 140.
- 19 *Writings*, vol. ix, 756.
- 20 Ibid., 420.
- 21 Quoted in Sealts, *Melville as Lecturer*, 94.
- 22 Quoted in Parker, *Herman Melville*, vol. ii, 395.
- 23 See Bode, *American Lyceum*, 120.
- 24 Zach Hutchins, "Herman Melville's Fejee Mermaid, or A Confidence Man at the Lyceum," *ESQ* 60 (2014), 103, 77.
- 25 *Writings*, vol. ix, 421.
- 26 *Writings*, vol. vi, 3.
- 27 *Writings*, vol. ix, 422.
- 28 Bayard Taylor, "The Philosophy of Travel," unpublished lecture, manuscript, Chester County Historical Society, Pennsylvania.