

On Encrusted, Con crescent Shells and the Thick Water of Faith

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*“Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun  
through water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air”*

— Chapter VII of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville (1851)

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While searching for the interpretative history of this particular passage from *Moby Dick*, I found myself (not unsurprisingly) confronted with some not-uninteresting yet somewhat-stale debates regarding the metaphysical and philosophical imagination of Herman Melville. Allow me briefly to recite one explication of this passage’s intellectual provenance by American literary scholar Robert Milder: “Ishmael’s words conflate two passages from Plato, one describing the heavens as viewed through the dense but unapparent medium of water, the other drawing on Socrates’ remark that humans are ‘fettered to [the body] like an oyster to its shell.’” Interrupting Milder, I’ll also add (as pointed out by other scholars) that Melville (via Ishmael) in this passage seems also to be slyly adapting Paul’s famous metaphor for faith as “seeing through a glass darkly” to the oceanic setting of his novel.<sup>1</sup> Milder continues, “In combining the passages in a single image (‘oysters observing the sun’), Ishmael confounds his idea even as he presents it, since oysters (having no eyes) see nothing at all, nor, so far as we resemble them, do we. Ishmael builds meaning, then coyly subverts it, constructing and deconstructing grand erections as he will do throughout *Moby-Dick*. What is vital and characteristic in [this chapter of the novel] is not Ishmael’s declared faith in immortality, which cannot survive the telling; it is his metamorphosis

of despair into devil-may-care exuberance, his delight in linguistic play, and his affirmation of the spirit against all powers of fate and circumstance, divinity included.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the intellectual acuity with which Milder and other scholars articulate this passage’s intertextual allusions to both the well-worn Platonic questions of the body-and-soul divide and Paul’s discourse on faith to the Corinthians, I can’t help but feel that these interpretations—and maybe even Ishmael himself—give short shrift to oysters! To me, the brilliance of Melville’s humans-to-oysters analogy is found not in its playful intertextuality with the heavy-hitters of Western philosophy, nor in Ishmael’s purported delight in constructing and deconstructing meaning in one fell turn of phrase, but rather in the way it renders spiritual meaning from the anatomy, material environment, and remarkably relational life cycle of oysters, wedding these creatures to the challenges and beauties produced by a life of faith. My essay attempts to describe what I have gleaned from Melville’s invocation of the oyster – a collection of ideas, images, and inspiration for continuing to maneuver through the “thick water” in which we sail as scholars of faith or, put differently, as faith-seeking scholars.

First, a few words on what I find remarkable about oysters and their materially enmeshed method of living. Oysters belong to the animal class Bivalvia, which includes marine and freshwater mollusks like clams, oysters, cockles, mussels, and scallops, all of which have laterally compressed bodies enclosed by a shell consisting of two hinged parts. It is the oyster’s shell that, thinking with the surface-level reading of the passage as Melville’s commentary on the Platonic conception of body and spirit, gives the oyster its most human-like characteristic: its inability to see fully, and its struggle to believe. The oyster cannot see past the clumsy, inelegant



“Acephala,” from Ernst Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* (1904)

shell in which it is encased and thus cannot apprehend the immanence of God. However, to bemoan the shell of an oyster as the impediment to its viewing of a distant heaven—and, by the analogy’s logic, to critique human intellect as the barrier to faith in God—is to neglect a vast world of divine meaning-making and relation-forming enacted by and through the oyster’s shell. Though the average beachcomber may encounter the husky remains of these bivalves as they wash up along the shoreline along with other detritus or plastic waste, oysters’ diptych-like shells constitute a vibrant entanglement of organic and inorganic matter existing

in concert with each other. For the sake of brevity, I’ll discuss two processes in which this relational entanglement occurs—encrustation and concrescence—and the affordances these processes bring to questions of faith, intellect, and their being made whole with each other.

First, encrustation. After hatching from their mother’s egg, oysters and other bivalves need to expand and grow their shells as the soft tissues of their internal bodies also grow. But unlike other animal structures such as a turtle’s shell, oyster shells are not organic and thus need to be grown and expanded by an accumulative or aggregative process called encrustation. Living along the sediment of ocean floors or riverbeds as oysters and other bivalves do, the organic tissues that line the area between the two shell halves (sometimes referred to as the ‘teeth’ or ‘lips’ of the oyster) secrete proteins and minerals gathered from the inorganic sediment and surrounding water as the oyster feeds. These minerals slowly encrust themselves in layers along



Left: Atlantic Oysters, Right, fossilized oyster shells encrusted onto each other

the shell's rim, steadily expanding its size. Thus, these creatures' shells grow as they encrust more and more matter around and onto themselves. In fact, similar to trees, marine biologists can discern the age of a given bivalve by measuring any visible concentric rings formed on the exterior of its shell. To me, this raises a spiritually instructive question about what oysters "are" both biologically and ontologically. If the main mass of an oyster's "body" is culled together via an encrusting of other matter, proteins, and substances onto itself, are not oysters always and essentially "more-than-oysters?" It is this state of being and living as constitutively "more-than-themselves" that I find so deeply spiritual about oysters. Their lives are witnesses to the miraculous re-conception of life and its meanings enabled by Christ's redemption and resurrection, an event that, as Matthew Wickman beautifully describes it, helps us see that "we are only ourselves because we are not ourselves *only* . . . that our singular lives become multiple, raised to more glorious and ultimately resurrected versions of themselves" thanks to Christ.<sup>3</sup>

In a way, I find both the joy and difficulty of a scholarly or intellectual life to be akin to the process of an oyster encrusting a shell as its body grows. Killian Quigley, a literary scholar

and environmental theorist I've had the pleasure of meeting and working with, has written eloquently and expansively on this process of encrustation, describing it as follows:

“Encrustation literally brings together, and mutually transforms, structures, materials, and histories.”<sup>4</sup> I consider the work we do as scholars of language and literature to be a radical bringing together of diverse materials and history into layers of story, of meaning, and (hopefully) of an increasingly inclusive body of ideas and knowledges. I think of scholars as beings who create meaning via an encrusting of the world around them, as people who live most fully by gathering and collecting diversely amid the sediment of beautiful artifacts and texts and history, and from them secrete new meanings, new possibilities, and new ways of being. There is a joy in this, but there is also the danger of extraction and hubris, of perhaps losing sight of what the life of a scholar becomes if it becomes *only* about the gathering of knowledge or encrusting such knowledge around an expanding but perhaps increasingly defensive and impenetrable shell. However, we must not forget that Melville originated this analogy in the vernacular of spirituality, faith, and belief. As faith-seeking scholars, might we learn from the oyster and consider the nature of our work's creative encrusting of ideas and histories from the world around us as a “more-than-ourselves” mode of life and being?

Noting the risks and potentialities of encrustation brings me to second process of an oyster's life: concrecence. I've noted the ways in which most bivalves form their shells through encrustation as they live buried in the soft sediments of rivers and seas. There are also other bivalves, such as mussels or some species of oyster, who permanently attach themselves to hard substrates, rocks, or other solid surfaces by cementing or concretizing their lower shell onto the hard surface. Now, the downsides posed by concrecence as metaphor for navigating faith and intellect are perhaps more apparent than with encrustation. After all, there are as rigid

concretions and inflexible orthodoxies within academics as there are in religion, and the dangers of both intellectuals or believers hardening and stubbornly affixing themselves immovably and recalcitrantly against the other needs little enumeration by me.

However, I do want to note how concrecence in the marine sense bears a positive and spiritual affordance. To borrow another definition from Quigley, concretion and concrecence like the kind performed by oysters also represent a wider set of “lively collaborations among sea waters, invertebrates, ocean sediments, and drowned anthropic objects, collaborations that operate through dynamic relations between encrustation and corrosion.”<sup>5</sup> While concretizing as both a literal and epistemological act can be and has been “coded negatively,” oysters teach me how “the hierarchy of substrate and



adornment” is perhaps as misaligned in scholarship as it is in religion.<sup>6</sup> As Quigley says, concretions formed by critters such as mollusks, oysters, and coral that grow along submarine shipwrecks have a “habit” of not only “preserving the objects they grow together with” but also a knack for generating in them new meanings and relations that, while they do not flatten or sidestep the histories such objects may have held before being concrenced by the marine life, produce a transformative change upon all beings and things concrenced together.<sup>7</sup> Precisely

because oysters and their kind refuse to allow their own subjectivity *to not be* affixed to those things upon which they concretize, these beings have much to show about the promise of belief and scholarship being made whole with each other. They illustrate to me how the desires of both my intellectual life—such as the desire to become attached to, at home within, and also a shaper of an academic field or discipline—and the desires formed by my life of faith—such as the yearnings for my church to grow in its potential for love and healing and thus repent of its history of inequality and injustice—might be fulfilled as I participate in the paradoxical process of concrecence. The places and spaces of both intellect- and faith-filled life (universities, religions, fields of study, communities and even families) require beings willing to humbly concrece themselves to them, thereby preserving their beauty and generating new pathways for good through radical acts of emplacement.

Now, I do not claim that my musings about the encrusted and concreced nature of oyster-life have escaped the attention and imagination of secular literary critics or Melville scholars. But I do feel that attuning myself to this passage's available spiritual and material metaphoricity provides a model for what faith-seeking scholars of literature and language might bring to the table. Before concluding this essay, I want to offer some final words regarding water and its role in what I consider to be one of Melville's many divinely inspired metaphors. While oysters and other critters like them are found, according to marine biologists, in almost any aquatic locale, Ishmael invokes the oyster to his reader while sitting in a pew of the Seaman's Bethel in the coastal town of New Bedford, Massachusetts. In this specific and deeply storied place, Ishmael and Melville would have encountered oysters born and harvested in the estuaries where the Acushnet River meets the Atlantic Ocean. Such waters are classified by geographers and hydrologists as brackish waters, or liminal aquatic zones where water possesses more

salinity than freshwater but not as much as seawater due to seawater and freshwater constantly intermixing. What form of water could better suit that tantalizing, somewhat ominous, but undeniably soul-stirring phrase of Melville's – "thick water!"

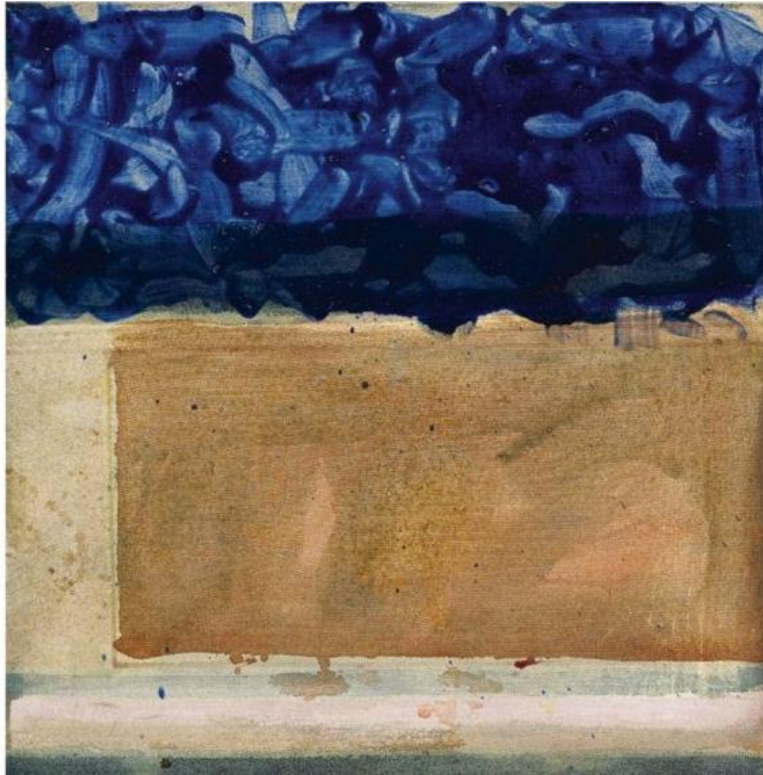
In learning from and listening to the participants in this year's Humanities and Belief workshop, I've come to understand the call I've received to pursue and sustain a life as a scholar



Brackish water where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean near Vancouver

of faith as a call to live in thick water. Over the past few years I've tended to erode my own religious identity, declaring myself as being ostensibly "faithful" to Christ but more concerned with the unavoidable un-truths and imperfections of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution. Yet because of Melville's oysters, I cannot deny that, when it comes to the Church and my place in it, I feel a call *to be in it*.





*Shoreline* by Helen Frankenthaler (1952)

To live in the thick water produced by our religion's constant flow of doubt and faith, revelation and mystery, institutional wrongs and pathways for deep healing is an invitation from Christ to live in the brackish gyre of pain and joy, confusion and conversion, unknowing and trust, and, crucially, to do so both with the

eye of a painter capturing the

beauty of an ocean landscape and with the vigor and vulnerability of a nineteenth-century sailor enlisted in a voyage across a vast sea. And just as Ishmael and his fellow mariners gathered at the seaside chapel of New Bedford before setting sail on the *Pequod*, returning to BYU for this Humanities and Belief workshop has afforded me the opportunity to gather devotionally with fellow sailors—all of us burdened,

differently perhaps, with the callouses, wounds, and weather-worn experiences of our most recent voyages through thick water—before



*The Fog Warning* by Winslow Homer (1885)

putting out to sea once more.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Milder, *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life we Imagine* (Oxford, 2006), 87-88.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Wickman, *Life to the Whole Being: The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor* (Provo: Maxwell Institute Press, 2022) 204.

<sup>4</sup> Killian Quigley, *Reading Underwater Wreckage: An Encrusting Ocean* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023) 15.

<sup>5</sup> Quigley, *Reading Underwater Wreckage*, 29

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 30. For instance, Quigley reads the ways in which marine sea life concretized upon the shipwrecks of ships that participated in both the colonization of Africa and the Americas and the Transatlantic slave trade.