

2005

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Matthew. "A Review of "Spell" by Dan Beachy-Quick." *The Iowa Review* 35.2 (2005): 163-166. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6102>

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MATTHEW MILLER

*A Review of Spell by Dan Beachy-Quick (Ahsakta Press, 2004)*

Two things that I am especially put off by in poetry are stupidity and pretension, and that helps explain why I am so enchanted by Dan Beachy-Quick's *Spell*. Beachy-Quick expresses an awareness of these opposing and arrested positions and articulates another way: to be dumb. The author cites Dickinson, "Can the Dumb define—the Divine?" and later answers—through Melville's character Starbuck—"More calm to myself—I am / A dumb thing, reverent so—." In a book that advances by way of open-endedness, this way of being in the world, dumbness, is a reliable rudder through *Spell*'s waters. By Melville's accomplishment in *Moby-Dick*, we are "struck dumb"—just as Melville himself was struck dumb (though certainly not deaf or mute) by the expressive potential of the trope he steered, and I am happily dumb in response to *Spell*: to my mind, one of the most accomplished, thoughtful, and moving gestures by an American poet in many years.

*Spell* might lose some of its more impatient readers. It is difficult; its personal qualities announce themselves obliquely; it asks a love of and familiarity with the quintessential doorstopper of American letters; it deploys idiosyncratic syntactic and grammatical maneuvers; it speaks from many positions; it surrounds itself with diverse contexts; and its music, one might say, is unfashionable (assuming that Hopkins and Dickinson's rhythms aren't the backbeat of your inner ear). Yet its charms, though they do grow on you, are not all acquired tastes: it is undeniably, immediately brilliant; it is humble; it knows that it is demanding and reaches out to you; it is utterly unique; it is voiced, not atomized; it never condescends; it defines things for you; and it follows a persuasive, if jagged, narrative arc.

At the heart of *Spell* lies the struggle to be a good reader. This, of course, was Ishmael's struggle—to be a reader of the whale and of Ahab, to be a reader of Queequeg's tattoos, to read himself, to read death, God, nature: the great, enduring "texts." The book's opening poem establishes a very personal context: the author's isolation from his wife while writing this book, and deep within *Spell* we encounter the author's personal struggle with the ques-

tion of becoming a father and the problem of healing a marriage. The personal qualities here, though deep, aren't the immediate force readers will be moved by, I imagine, so much as the dazzling dramatic enactment of Melville (it is only later in the book that the author's voice presses forth through the characters and the page). *Spell* is structured by way of an ensemble of monologues guided by the author's sense of music but also just as much by the characters' semi-autonomous dispositions. Sometimes the author's own voice makes its song, and the author seems equally adept at telling his emotional truths directly or "at a slant" by way of his characters. It's hard to say which method is more moving (or even personal), and the voices of Melville's characters and the author's own sometimes seem to meld, often with haunting effect.

One key to grasping *Spell* is to understand the *double entendre* of the book's title. The most obvious layer of meaning relates to enchantment—by language, poetry, obsession with writing—but equally important to the author is the title's imperative meaning: to spell out words. Early in the book, characters spell out their names, sounding forth multiple meanings for themselves in the archival memory of language, and the meanings Beachy-Quick teases out are startling and shed new insight into Melville's linguistic complexity. To take my favorite example, Pip knows himself as "horny patch on the tip of the tongue of a bird, / infectious" and as "a seed in fruit," as "dots on dice, dominos, playing cards," as "Chirp of a small bird," and also as "Crack of the shell when hatching." It is rather stunning to consider how the cast of definitions plays out in this sad little character and equally so to see how in *Spell* these multiple meanings are kept in constant play throughout, with the word "pip" becoming a gorgeous motif uniting themes of song, seed, and birth.

As sensitive as this book is to linguistic nuance, it is particularly amazing how the author's own life keeps calling the ensemble back to what it hasn't yet addressed. But who really is the "author" in *Spell*? I am stressing here the autobiographical possibilities of the book, though the book can be approached in other ways. The "I" that speaks seems also like Melville, telling the story of how he wrote his story, and it could be read with equal cogency in this way. Approached either way, *Spell* personalizes the mythic qualities of *Moby-Dick* into a duality of author and reader, where each needs the other, but between which, as Emerson put it, "An

innavigable sea washes with silent waves.” My favorite of *Spell*’s six “chapters,” chapter five, allegorizes the tension between reader and writer as an author’s queries to an unanswering “editor.” It’s a complex dynamic: we, the real readers of *Spell*, overhear a one-sided conversation between author and “editor,” who, so I take it at least, is gradually shaped as the ultimate “reader” and “editor” of one’s innermost passions. For Melville and, so it would seem, for the author of *Spell*, the passion here is for communication and language; our medium entraps us. As the author struggles to disentangle himself from a life of signifiers, the author’s beloved struggles to engage the author without language, through sight and touch. So at the same time as the duality between “author” and “editor” elevates into a prayer to the ultimate reader, a third presence, the beloved—the author’s wife—intrudes on the dynamic, rendering it a triangle (or perhaps something four-sided, if we include ourselves, the overhearing readers). As the author seeks to explain himself to God, he feels himself losing grasp of materiality, feels his life drifting away from him, and his wife, whose own struggle we sense but never quite fathom, reckons with this abandonment and seeks to call him home. In the tension between the points of this figuration, the drama of *Spell* unfolds.

This struggle in turn is refracted through the drama of *Moby-Dick*, as the author empathizes with the major characters. In chapter six, the author’s voice is interpolated with the voices of Queequeg, Starbuck, Ahab, and finally Ishmael, who merges with the author in the chapter’s last four stanzas:

And then water swallows men. A grave-magnet  
Pulls them down. Fathom me—

Editor, fathom me. I am a known depth. I’m a  
Definition easy: a man, a mortal man,

A man with five needles on each hand  
Pointing heavenward. Heed me. I’m lost.

It is difficult to suggest the various levels of meaning implied here. Earlier in this same poem, for example, the author’s wife has poured ink over a “cracked compass” with a needle “sharp,

but stuck . . . until ink / Seeped through cracked glass and left the compass / Ink-full. The gold needle loosened, floated: a line." Here the gesture is one of liberation, as meaning ("ink") in the material world lifts the author's "stuck needle" (his self-destructive fixation with language) until it floats free and produces a different kind of "line" than the kind obsessing the author. So the "grave magnet" in the couplets just quoted resonates with this symbolism, elaborating on it: a "mortal man" is pulled down toward death, and the author/Ishmael begs to be "fathomed" by God, so that his "known depth" (punning on "known death") leads him to point the "five needles on each hand . . . heavenward." So an author is set free by a wife's compassionate insistence, and awareness of mortality figures one toward the divine.

The compass of *Spell* points heavenward, but its anchor is blankness—of the page, of the whale, and of the body-in-the-world in a life of language. At the end of each section in the book *Beachy-Quick* develops, stanza by stanza, a kind of under-poem that constantly calls us back "to that *Belly-of-Blank*" in words and the obsessive enterprise of writing: the physical body (of a person, of a linguistic referent). In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab's incomplete body obsessively quests for its missing limb, swallowed, like Jonah, into the whale's belly. In *Spell*, it is the author's own body that is missing—not from the book (as much as can be said for any book)—so much as from his wife's and his own personal life while he obsessed with this project. In *Spell*'s haunting fifth chapter, this crisis surfaces: "I asked / My wife to read this poem before I sent it / To you. She said, 'No.' / I said: 'Who are you? You don't know me / Anymore.'" That this vulnerability is held in balance with such intellectual acumen is a remarkable achievement, and I am especially moved by the author's dignified response: as Ahab's "ghost-leg" itches for its object—a mutual itch between limb and body, body and limb, so a wife itches for a complete marriage, an author for a more complete life, and humanity, terminally incomplete, for the "nerveless proof" of its inner meaning. The consolation in *Spell* is ultimately that of birth: of a child, of a book.