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The Romance with Melville and American Literary History

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The Romance with Melville and American Literary History

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Given that this project in part aims to articulate the value of critical acknowledgement, it is a travesty that this suggestively titled section of my dissertation should be so cursory. When I think about how I came to the texts I analyze, my arguments, and my critical disposition, it seems to me that all these dimensions of "my" work represent the outcomes of unforgettable conversations with students, friends, and mentors; or of my engagement with a particularly compelling talk, essay, or book. Since to acknowledge fully is a fantasy—a descent into an inescapable maze of impression and influence—here I can only acknowledge the debts I feel most acutely.

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argue with deliberation and self-awareness. Winfried Fluck also illuminated the value of reading criticism with rigor and care, both in his scholarship and his commentary on my work. To a large degree, I owe the very name of this dissertation to his writing on "the romance with America," so his presence on my committee was a great asset. He allowed me to sound the resonance and validity of my claims, and to situate these claims within the larger critical community.

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The Romance with Melville and American Literary History

Bradley Ray King, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Evan B. Carton

This dissertation traces the historical emergence of what I call the romance with Melville during the postwar moment and argues that its striking endurance demands that we rethink the relationship between the discipline's past and present. For the enduring vitality of the romance with Melville throughout the twentieth century points to deep continuities across major cuts in the discipline's history. These continuities that the romance makes visible suggest that the discipline's past is not so monolithically invested in masculinism, nationalism, and racism as many dominant voices have claimed it was, and also that the discipline's present has not broken with its predecessors as completely as many had thought.

I begin with a chapter that introduces the prevalence of the romance with Melville in American literary history, interrogates why Melville's work lends itself so readily to this hermeneutic move, and articulates how the persistence of this move upsets the authoritative histories of American literary studies. My second chapter describes how Melville's final story *Billy Budd* elicited a remarkably explicit transatlantic conversation about the affective and political ramifications of postwar heteronormativity. Chapter 3 examines C.L.R. James's conversation with postwar

Americanists about *Moby-Dick,* a conversation in which James sought to galvanize the critical community to fight the anti-democratic Cold War immigration laws under which James himself was being deported. My final chapter analyzes Ralph Ellison's use of *Moby-Dick*, "Bartleby," "Benito Cereno," and *The Confidence-Man* to argue that American literature is fundamentally concerned with and informed by issues of racial injustice and inequality. In both his literary criticism and his fiction, Ellison, I argue, used Melville's writing to criticize the racial negligence of American literary critics and to reflect on the ironies of his own abiding loyalty to white canonical writers like Melville.

When one follows the various permutations of the romance with Melville in this moment and attends to the contestations it facilitated, one finds a rich, politically multivalent critical discourse that in many important but unacknowledged ways lays the groundwork for the political desires and textual attachments that continue to animate American literary studies.

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Preface

From its foundational moments in the early twentieth century to its diverse array of manifestations a century later, the field of American literary studies appears to be irresistibly drawn to the writings of Herman Melville. Melville's centrality to Americanist discourse has persisted through the major sea-changes in our discipline's history. His work has captured the admiration of modernists engrossed with the iconoclastic artist of complexity and ambiguity, proponents of the democratic possibilities of literature, of ideology-critique radicals, canon-busting multi-culturalists, and queer theorists. Celebrations of American literature and culture, critical inquiry into American citizenship, deconstructions of nationalism, assaults on imperialism, racism, and state homophobia—all these projects of Americanist criticism find powerful expression through readings of Melville's work. I call this sense that Melville speaks directly and powerfully to one's most pressing political and critical concerns "the romance with Melville."

This dissertation traces the historical emergence of the romance with Melville and argues that its striking persistence demands that we rethink the relationship between the discipline's past and present. For the enduring vitality of the romance with Melville throughout the twentieth century points to deep continuities across major cuts in the discipline's history—continuities in both our attachments to certain texts and in our desires for radical political change to follow from the work of literary

criticism. These continuities that the romance makes visible suggest that the discipline's past is not so monolithically invested in masculinism, nationalism, and racism as many dominant voices have claimed it was, and also that the discipline's present has not broken with its predecessors as completely as many had thought.

"The romance with Melville" is a term I adapt from the work of Winfried Fluck. Drawing on "the close connection between romance and national self-definition," Fluck uses the phrase "romance with America" to describe the hermeneutic practice of interpreting a cultural artifact as representative of a generalized "Americanness." Whether one celebrates that Americanness or condemns it as racist, masculinist, or imperialistic, the "romance with America" remains intact. Even after the transnational turn, many of the most influential Americanists, Fluck convincingly shows, continue to be "motivated by a search for, and a projection of, certain ideals [. . .] like democracy, multicultural citizenship, or civil disobedience" (88). Fluck's argument here builds on Eliza New's important insight that "the romance" is "as much a critical as a fictional genre." And she shares Fluck's sense that Americanist criticism, with "its penchant for projections of national selfhood," remains deeply invested in this particular critical genre (New 31, 7).

Fluck and New persuasively criticize the "totalistic rhetoric" of the critical romance (New 7). Both argue that the romance tends to oversimplify its objects of analysis by placing texts within deterministic national narratives or enlisting them in the service of presentist political agendas. While I am sympathetic to their critique of

the romance, I want to take a less denunciatory and more anthropological approach to the romance with Melville, so that I can attend to the diversity of its manifestations and the possibilities for critical disputation, social criticism, and disciplinary self-reflection that it has opened.

I argue that Melville's relevance to issues of nation, democracy, sexuality, and economic and racial oppression emerged alongside the concretization of his disciplinary centrality in the 1940s and 50s—the culmination of what is known as "the Melville revival." The Melville revival is often associated with the 1920s—a decade that witnesses the first Melville biography (by Raymond Weaver, 1921) and the first statements of Melville's importance to American literature (Van Wyck Brooks, 1918; D.H. Lawrence, 1923), leftist politics (Brooks, 1918; Lewis Mumford, 1926), and race (Sterling Brown, 1937). But these early conversations are but the tip of the iceberg when one considers the veritable explosion of romances with Melville during World War II and the following decade.

Jennifer Fleissner has rightly suggested that most contemporary Americanists approach postwar criticism with an attitude of "moral superiority," and this attitude, Fleissner argues, has produced reductive, misleading histories of Americanist discourse ("After the New Americanists" 177). Indeed, this pervasive disposition of political contempt for what might called the "old Americanists" has obscured the power and prescience postwar writers inside and outside the discipline, many of whom were writing about issues that continue to animate American literary studies.

By analyzing the rich, contentious conversations about nation, democracy, sexuality, and race that the romance with Melville facilitated, this dissertation aims to rectify widely shared misperceptions of postwar Americanist discourse as formalist, nationalistic, uncritically masculinist, and only political in hegemonic ways.

Central to these prescient postwar conversations was F.O. Matthiessen's foundational work *American Renaissance* (1941), which devotes a book-length section to Melville. Matthiessen's work became a discursive "center of gravity," to borrow Cody Marr's and Christopher Hager description of *American Renaissance,* as a constellation of diverse positions emerged in response to his readings of Melville's work (263). Critics like Richard Chase (1949) and Newton Arvin (1950), followed by the British artists Benjamin Britten and E.M. Forster in their collaborative opera of *Billy Budd* (1951), would explicate and extend Matthiessen's conflicted writing about Melville's entanglements of same-sex desire and democratic sociality. At the same time, non-academic intellectuals like C.L.R. James (1953) and Ralph Ellison (beginning in 1951) would perform readings of Melville to elaborate and radicalize Matthiessen's criticisms of capitalism, nationalism, and racism.

But the postwar romance with Melville was more than just a means to articulate and authorize critical and political interventions. It also compelled intensive reflection on the political intricacies of midcentury intellectual life. The always-perceptive "New York Intellectual" Mary McCarthy argued that the coercive conservativism of the postwar years demanded that intellectuals disguise their more

subversive positions under the mask of "the American way of life." "The investigative demands of [Joseph] McCarthy and [Pat] McCarran," she writes, "create new underground men behind the façade of conformity [. . .] who float like glittering icebergs on the surface of society with the perilous eight-ninths submerged" (40-42). The pervasive anticommunism and xenophobia of the Cold War led even Marxist radicals like James to cast their politics in the language of national unity and patriotism. Melville's growing status as an icon of national pride—"the great American novelist," as James more than once calls him—made the genre of Melville criticism into an effective "façade of conformity." There is perhaps no better example of this Melvillean conformity than when James, while awaiting deportation, wrote a book about Melville from prison and sent it to every member of Congress as part of a plea for U.S. citizenship.

In this moment of the "underground" intellectual, many of Melville's characters became means of articulating the complex, multi-faced political agency that McCarthy describes. Several critics in the emerging academic discipline of American letters used the "intellectual" but tragically dutiful Captain Vere to draw out the sexual and political compromises demanded of postwar academics. James read Ishmael's conflict between his sense of Ahab's cruel coercion of the *Pequod*'s crew and his complicity in the hunt for Moby Dick as anticipating the dilemma of midcentury intellectuals. And Ellison, always highly conscious of his performative intellectual identity, identified Melville's shape-shifting tricksters, Babo and the

confidence man, as models for strategic political intervention—for what he called "striking back in hard angry collaboration" (*Three Days* 392).

This seminal moment in the history of both Melville and American literary studies thus consists of uneasy, complex entanglements of complicity and resistance, of collaboration and anger. Melville's writing was used to celebrate literary nationalism while denouncing the injustices of the state, to affirm a white canon while calling out the literary academy's racially negligent hermeneutics, to defend heteronormative masculinity while implicating it in affective suffering and state violence.

While I draw on and make arguments about texts ranging from Melville' public emergence in the antebellum period to the present, my focus is on the constellation of meanings and the discursive power that Melville's texts accumulate during the postwar years. During this moment, I argue, writers like Matthiessen, Chase, Arvin, Ellison, and James invested Melville's work with relevance and value that persists into the twenty-first century. These postwar conversations about Melville placed his work at the center of American literary studies, where they for better or worse remain. But more importantly, they tilled the soil of Melville's dense writings, making them a fertile site for the radical interventions of succeeding generations of Americanists.

Chapter 1

The romance with Melville

Many of the most sweeping disciplinary innovations in American literary studies have been conducted by means of the romance with Melville. Consider, for instance, three key statements of the political turn in Americanist critical history. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen's New-Americanist manifesto *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1987), which calls for reinterpreting American "ideals" of patriotism and democracy as hegemonic "ideologies," concludes with an entire section on "The Example of Melville" (14-15). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) launches its exposure of the critical centrality of "the crisis of homo/heterosexual definition" to "twentieth century western culture" with an extended reading of *Billy Budd* (1). And Toni Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" (1989) exposes the constitutive presence of African Americans in American cultural production through an analysis of *Moby-Dick*.

How did Melville's once-marginal body of work come to command such power for Americanists, theorists, and artists? Certainly the issues that animate these seminal renderings of Melville—national identity, democracy, sexuality, race—intermingle on what might be called the "surface" of his writing. But these issues only emerge in response to Melville's writing decades after the publication of his most

celebrated works. The resonances between Melville's writing and the concerns of his most influential interpreters imply a complex reciprocity between texts and readers. These resonances suggest that the romance with Melville cannot be described as either the result of Melville's "influence" or as the product of readers peering into the sea of his writings only to see their own reflections. To speak of Melville's "influence" would be to suggest that his works manifest a stable, timeless meaning that dictates the readings of his interpreters. Studying Melville's "influence" would thus efface the historical emergences of these meanings—emergences that this project aims to document. But to speak of these readings as mere projections of a critical community would be to overlook the historically formative role that Melville's writings have played across multiple communities in American literary studies.

Eschewing these "originalist" and "constructivist" theories of meaning, I want to suggest that the mutuality between Melville and his interpreters is best understood according to Hans Robert Jauss's account of the "dialogical" relationship between texts and readers. Jauss argues that a text's meaning is neither a "self-mediating event nor an emanation [of the reader]" (32). Rather, for Jauss meaning emerges only in "a dialectical relationship of the present to the past, according to which the past work can answer and 'say something' to us only when the present observer has posited the question that draws it back out of seclusion" (32). The dialogical relationships between texts and readers mark what Jauss calls "the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning that is embedded in a work" (30). They are, to quote Jauss once

more, the sites at which meaning is "activated in the stages of [the work's] historical reception" (30).

Melville's "revival" from obscurity in the second quarter of the twentieth century manifests the historicity—the *madeness,* or *activated-ness*—of the meanings and power that his writings continue to command. Between the 1920s and the 50s, one witnesses formative dialogical relationships between Melville and the critical community, as many of the most resonant critical innovations of the moment emerge from close encounters with the details of Melville's writing: encounters between Ishmael and Queequeg's queer intimacy and F.O Matthiessen and Newton Arvin's concerns with homosexuality and democracy, or between the elaborate descriptions of the working life of the *Pequod*'s crew and C.L.R. James's radical politics, or between Babo and the confidence man's racial masquerades and Ralph Ellison's preoccupation with the democratic possibilities of racial performativity. It is easy to take Melville's relevance to homosexuality, capitalist critique, and racial politics for granted. These meanings, however, are not inherent, self-manifesting qualities of Melville's work, but qualities that have been *made,* forged in the complex transactions between his writings and their twentieth-century readers. This dissertation tracks how such meanings and value *happened* to Melville's writings during the postwar moment by analyzing the writings of some of Melville's most visionary, influential readers.

Disciplinary histories

By analyzing the postwar romance with Melville in its various and conflicted permutations, this project demands a critical reconsideration of the most commonly cited narratives of Americanist critical history. These accounts, written by scholars who fall under the umbrella of the "New Americanists," present postwar criticism as a nationalistic, masculinist, racist, and heteronormative discourse. The New Americanists boldly articulated seminal critiques of a white, male-dominated field, and their work has been instrumental to the democratization of American literary studies. While I acknowledge the profound political importance of the New Americanists' work and share their conviction that literary interpretation should be an instrument of social justice, I argue that their accounts of disciplinary history are often reductive and misleading. The New Americanist critique of postwar criticism does not account for the rich contestation among critics of the postwar moment, nor does it acknowledge the ways in which a single critical text can pull in conflicting ideological directions. Neglecting the most compelling, prescient dimensions of postwar literary criticism, the New Americanist account of postwar criticism fuels what Jennifer Fleissner has called "a narrative of progress conjoining 'old' and 'new' American literary studies" ("After" 186). My dissertation calls into question this all-too-familiar narrative, and joins Fleissner in challenging the "moral superiority" with which many Americanists approach our critical history ("After" 178).

As Fleissner's recent comments suggest, the New Americanist consensus appears to be loosening, but it currently persists as the dominant account of Americanist critical history. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this consensus guides how the contemporary field of American literary studies conceptualizes its past and defines its identity in the present moment. One could cite multitudes of its manifestations, but for now I want to locate its major claims in two book-length studies published amid the political turn of the 1980s and 90s: Russell Reising's *The Unusable Past* (1986) and David Shumway's *Creating an American Civilization* (1994).

Both Reising and Shumway argue the same point: that until the late 1960s, the project of American literary studies existed to promote and extend the hegemonic power of an oppressive national ideology rooted in U.S. global dominance, racism, and heteronormative masculinism. As Reising puts it, the study of American literature represented "a form [. . .] of American cultural imperialism functioning to consolidate and define the cultural dominance of the U.S" (218). Focusing on Van Wyck Brooks, F.O. Matthiessen, Lionel Trilling, and Richard Chase, both books find this ideological agenda at work throughout what they call "the most influential theories" and "the dominant products and practices" of postwar American literary studies. Different as these theories, products and practices may appear, according to Reising and Shumway, they all perform the same cultural work: they "celebrate American civilization" and "reinforce the pervasive political message of the postwar era that America had achieved a legitimate global superiority" (Shumway 132).

As a corollary to this claim, Reising and Shumway also argue that the "dominant" voices in the field suppressed the "social" concerns of the texts they canonized. "These theorists," writes Reising, referring to Matthiessen, Trilling, and Chase, "project a vision of American literature as an isolated body of texts, estranged from [. . .] American social or material reality" (17). Their "asocial critical theses," he writes, "deflect the social and political significance of American literature" (48). And any political opposition that might have emerged from writing about authors like Whitman, Melville, Emerson, or Thoreau was silenced in the service of national hegemony. Shumway goes as far so to claim that it would be "wishful thinking" to believe that there was "significant opposition" to nationalism and its attendant forms of racism and masculinism "during the entire period of [his] study," which extends from the 1920s to the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s (Shumway 10). Writing as if his audience might be hesitant to accept such a sweeping thesis, Shumway reassures us: "the simple fact is that before the late 1960s the academic study of literature was not rife with emergent forces" (12).[1]

[1] Historians of the discipline who are less invested in the radical break between "old" and "new" American literary studies have also raised objections to how many New Americanists have oversimplified pre-New Left criticism. Graff, for instance, rightly claims that postwar critical discourse was "far from being organized on a centralized logocentric model" and that it consisted of "a variety of disciplinary

Paul Lauter's essay "Melville Climbs the Canon" (1994) applies this dismal thesis to the foundation of Melville studies. In this well-researched account of "how it was that Melville was transformed during the 1920s from an obscure teller of South Sea tales into the pre-eminent American novelist," Lauter raises the rich, provocative question of "Melville's usefulness to the modernist project of the 1920s," and he documents the first generation of critics to champion Melville as "high art" and to celebrate his "allusive, syntactically intricate style and convoluted plotting" (1). Yet Lauter ultimately comes to a conclusion resonant with Shumway and Reising's

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vocabularies that nobody can reduce to the common measure of any metalanguage" (12-13). Like Graff, Leitch and Vanderbilt also provide remarkably well-researched, richly heterogeneous accounts of American critical history that rigorously detail the contentious debates among New York intellectuals, leftist Americanists, and New Critics. Leitch's work is particularly helpful, in that it articulates compelling continuities between the critical concerns of the Old and New Left and provides a thick account of the history of leftist politics in American criticism. Graff and Leitch's work is a compelling alternative to the reductive arguments of Shumway and Reising, but all these accounts totally ignore the critical contributions of lesser-known critics like Arvin and non-academics like James and Ellison—all of whom were in direct dialogue with and published in the same journals as Matthiessen, Trilling, and Chase.

arguments. As "Melville climbs the canon," he argues, critics of the 20s use his work to articulate and reinforce "traditional high cultural values—often connected with the academy—against a social and cultural 'other' generally, if ambiguously, portrayed as feminine, genteel, exotic, dark, foreign, and numerous" (6). What emerges is "a distinctly masculine, Anglo-Saxon image of Melville"—an image used to evidence "an equality in culture which would be consonant with America's established title to military and diplomatic parity" (5).[2]

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[2] One important account of Melville studies that I do not discuss here is Clare Spark's *Hunting Captain Ahab: Psychological Warfare and the Melville Revival*. I do not mention her work in this conversation because her stringent arguments for "individualism" and against "multiculturalism" are so out of keeping with the leftism of the New Americanists, and because her work has not inspired a scholarly following. In a reactionary tone, Spark argues that the early Melvilleans—she cites Henry Murray, Charles Olson, Mumford, Matthiessen, and Chase—and New Americanists are all "romantic anti-capitalists" who have "submerged," in her terms, "the legitimacy and value of the dissenting, creative individual" to elevate "fascist" ideologies of "corporatism" and "group cohesion" (12-13). That Spark would opt to conduct this ideological battle by way of arguments about Melville and Melville studies speaks to the ongoing importance of Melville's work as a facilitator of intensive political disputation.

The New Americanism's account of postwar criticism, I argue, neglects important conversations about issues of social justice, race, and sexuality—but their critique of the patriarchy of Old Americanism cannot be questioned. With a few notable exceptions, this was a generation of men writing about men.[3] Before the New Americanism, Nina Baym had brilliantly explicated how the postwar moment's most influential accounts of American literature excluded both women writers and women characters in texts written by men. Baym shows that critics including Matthiessen, Trilling, Chase, R.W.B. Lewis, and Leslie Fiedler were all beholden to fundamentally masculine critical concerns—"man in the open air," the individual in opposition to "society," the "American Adam," etc. This is also true of the Melvilleans I focus on here, many of whom actually used Melville to conceptualize and perform their own masculine identities. Matthiessen, Arvin, and Chase all look to Vere as an exemplary, even if tragic, model of "manly excellence," to quote Chase. And James, when he was

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[3] These notable exceptions include Constance Roarke, whose *American Humor* (1931) was widely influential, and Eleanor Melville Metcalf—Herman's granddaughter—who played a pivotal role in publishing the *Billy Budd* manuscripts and published a biography of Melville in 1953. It is also worth noting here that Matthiessen's first book was about Sarah Orne Jewett. For an excellent analysis of Matthiessen's writing about Jewett, see Travis M. Foster's "Matthiessen's Public Privates: Homosexual Expression and the Aesthetics of Sexual Inversion."

fighting deportation, cited his expertise on Melville as he presented himself to the authorities as the masculine head of an American nuclear family.[4] Coupled with the scarcity of female characters in Melville's writing, the masculinism among postwar Melvilleans produced a distinctly male critical culture. As a measure of the field's reputation of masculinism, one could point to the renowned feminist critic Lillian Robinson's expression of utter alienation in 1983 from Melville and Melville studies. "My *bête noire,"* she writes, "has always been the white whale" (*Feminisms* 120). Until later in the 80s, Melville studies involved only a few women and even fewer challenges to the transparent masculinism of the field.

The feminist critique of Americanist critical history calls attention to the important limitations in the practice and scope of the postwar academy, and to the very real political progress the field has made. Condemning this undeniably patriarchal, mostly white generation of critics was integral to what, from the perspective of social justice and democracy, must be considered the most important "turn" in critical history. I refer, of course, to the racial and sexual diversification of both the texts the field studies and teaches, and the demographics of those working in the field—an effort that began in the late 1960s and continues into the present moment. As Baym's argument suggests, attacking an older generation of critics was

[4] For an excellent analysis of James's masculinity, see W. Chris Johnson, "Sex and Subversive Alien."

understood to be a necessary component of opening the field to a new generation of radical scholars who would institutionalize the study of women writers, popular literatures, and minority writers.

Robyn Wiegman has persuasively argued that the New Americanists' primary endowment to American literary studies is not attention to gender, race and justice — for that attention came primarily from feminists and ethnic studies advocates—but the institutionalization of disciplinary self-reflexivity. According to Wiegman, "the priority of reflecting on the state of the field is not simply one of its most familiar gestures but the engine of its disciplinary reproduction"("The Ends" 386). And this "self reflexive critical assessment," Wiegman adds, was always conducted in the service of "radical self-transformation" ("The Ends" 386). I would add to Wiegman's point here that it is precisely this commitment to oppositional transformation that led the New Americanists to obfuscate political, sexual, and racial conversations among postwar critics and prevented them from recognizing that their own democratic critical desires were in many ways consistent with those of their predecessors. The New Americanism's self-reflexivity is always, as Wiegman puts it, "bound to some version of critique as a political rhetoric "("The Ends" 387). And this binding to critique has drawn New Americanists to present their work as attending to the contestations of race, gender, sexuality, and class that they accuse their predecessors as having effaced (Wiegman *Object* 200).

I want to acknowledge here that my analysis of the romance with Melville emerges from and extends the New Americanist imperatives to consider the discipline's fraught relationship with race, class, and gender, and to interrogate the stakes of our attachments to objects of study and modes of literary analysis. Lauter speaks to the motivations of my own project in his self-reflexive demand that we not take Melville's power and value to American literary studies for granted, and that we always inquire "into what contests for cultural authority Melville was being conscripted" (1).[5] But how can we claim to understand these contests over "the

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[5] There are a few notable books on the history of Melville studies that do not consider the important ideological questions of "cultural authority" that Lauter's analysis raises. One of these is George Cotkin's *Dive Deeper,* which seeks to trace Melville's presence in twentieth-century American culture, but never rises to any serious analytical argument beyond the trivial claim that *Moby-Dick* inspires it readers "to dive into mysteries of meaning, into the storms of existence, into the depths of our souls" (ix). Similarly, David Dowling's *Chasing the White Whale* claims to interrogate "what Melville means today" in its subtitle, but also remains mired in unanalytical praise for "the still palpitating spirit of Melville," and bland pleas for *Moby-Dick's* "power to move us, change us." (5-7). Much more helpful and well-researched than Cotkin or Dowling's work, Brian Yothers's *Melville's Mirrors* is an immensely useful survey of Melville criticism that includes short summaries of many

meanings of 'Herman Melville' in literary study"—to quote Lauter once more—without attending to the plurality of complex voices involved in the contestation? If we are interested in "Herman Melville" and masculinity, why not bring into the conversation the fact that many of the first books about Melville were written by homosexuals? Or if we want to understand the relationship between "Herman Melville" and racial politics, why not discuss the rich writings by James, Ellison, and Sterling Brown about Melville's depictions of nonwhite characters?

These problems with the standard histories of the discipline have begun to be addressed in several book-chapters and articles, which provide a much broader, murkier account of American literary studies in the first half of the twentieth century. In an early example of this sort of work, Alan Nadel champions Ellison's writing for "decentering" the "ethno- and logocentricism" of the postwar Americanists by exposing the importance of race and slavery to writers like Melville and Twain (xii). Ellison, he argues, "exposes" postwar critics' avoidance of race as "a typical

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of the critics I focus on here. None of this work, however, considers Melville's cultural authority, nor do they make arguments about how Melville's reception helps us to understand the unacknowledged continuities in disciplinary history. These "uncritical" accounts of Melville studies, in other words, fail to interrogate what I think are the most important implications of Melville's longstanding disciplinary centrality for Americanists.

whitewashing of American history, one that flows from the social/historical consciousness that forced the black into invisibility" (94). Similarly, Donald E. Pease has argued that James's book about *Moby-Dick* radically subverted the hegemonic nationalism of Americanist discourse. Pease claims that in the hands of the nationalistic postwar Americanists, *Moby-Dick* became "one of the planetary agents responsible for the global hegemonization of American values" ("Extraterritoriality" 205).[6] James's work, according to Pease, "dismantles" this "Cold War consensus" by

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[6] Pease claims that critics like Matthiessen and Chase enlisted *Moby-Dick* in the anti-communist, imperialistic national "hegemon" by juxtaposing Ishmael's "individual freedom" to the "totalitarian power" of Ahab, and reading "Ishmael's survival [as] a sign of the free world's triumph over totalitarian power." ("Melville" 415). Summarizing this widely cited argument, Spanos writes that postwar Americanists "privileged Ishmaelite America as the symbolic agent of the 'free world' in its self-ordained effort to resist Ahabian communist aggression" (*Errant* 33). Recently, Castiglia has rightly pointed out that no postwar critic ever actually made this argument ("Cold War" 221-222). Castiglia's point here is true and important, but I am hesitant about his corollary claim that Pease and Spanos were the Americanists who *really were* complicit with "the Cold-War State," since their critical methodology leads them "to search for and report hidden and threatening ideologies in seemingly innocuous places, remaining themselves free from ideological motives" ("Cold War"

reconfiguring *Moby-Dick* into a critique of the oppression of "the mariners, renegades, and castaways whose catastrophic deaths had been justified by the Americanist interpretive community" ("Extraterritoriality," 206).

More recently, several scholars have repudiated such condemnations of "the Americanist interpretative community," identifying critics like Matthiessen, Trilling, Arvin, and Chase as voices of political opposition and democratic hope. Fleissner claims that "the New Americanists tended to oversimplify their predecessors' arguments" by "attacking" them as "Cold Warriors" ("After" 175). In fact, she argues, postwar Americanists were actually the ones who pioneered American studies as "a space for meaningful social critique" of heteronormativity and economic injustices ("After" 175). Elaborating this point, Castiglia calls Arvin's 1950 book on Melville a "queer socialist manifesto" and argues that Chase's critical work "staunchly

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220). Like Pease and Spanos, Castiglia plays fast and loose with the idea of "Cold War ideology"—a concept that for all these critics becomes little more than a rhetorical tool for making one's critical processors into politically corrupt, hegemonic straw men. While I deeply admire Castiglia's compelling reparative work on Arvin and Chase, I fear that this critique of Pease and Spanos here perpetuates a tiresome sort of "gotcha game," in which critical discourse threatens to become a succession of attempts to call out and overcome the corrupt political "complicities" of one's predecessors.

criticized the tendencies in American culture that led to Cold War conformity" ("Arvin" 178 ; "Cold War" 219). Fleissner and Castiglia thus overturn the New Americanists "self-congratulatory narrative of progress" by showing how postwar Americanists founded the discipline on the values of democratic dissent.[7]

Nadel and Pease's version of the violent ethnocentrism of postwar Americanists certainly differs from Fleissner and Castiglia's revisionary accounts of their democratic queer socialism. But all of these analyses of Arvin, Chase, Ellison, and James are fundamentally committed to a similar project: documenting the voices of radical racial, economic, and sexual opposition that traditional disciplinary histories efface. And in this sense, these reparative readings represent important correctives to Shumway, Reissing, and Lauter's homogenization of pre-New Left Americanist discourse.

Compelling as this work is, I want to argue that the language of radical oppositionality—"dismantling," "social critique," "staunch" criticism—that

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[7] I should note here that before Castiglia and Fleissner's self-consciously "reparative" return to Arvin and Chase, there were also several efforts to recuperate the progressive leftist and sexual politics of Matthiessen, most notably David Bergman's "F.O. Matthiessen: The Critical as Homosexual" (1990) and Jay Grossman's "The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen's Whitman, Whitman's Matthiessen" (1998), which I discuss below.

characterizes this reparative approach does not do justice to the complex political agencies at work in Arvin, Chase, James, and Ellison's writing. Furthermore, this way of positioning these critics and intellectuals relies on what has become a predictable tendency either to attack what one studies as complicit or to celebrate it as subversive and liberatory. Eve Sedgwick, along with many others, has compellingly criticized this tendency.[8] The dualism of "the hegemonic and the subversive," she argues, has become a "reified form" of critical analysis, in which "the hegemonic" means little more than a vague "status quo" and "the subversive" names "a purely negative

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[8] Another seminal document of the "post-critique" position is Bruno Latour's much discussed 2003 article in *Critical Inquiry,* "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" It's important to note here that Castiglia and Fleissner have both eloquently voiced this weariness with critique in the field of American literary studies. Castiglia has argued that as ideology critique "becomes graduate-training dogma," it "threatens to become intellectually ubiquitous" and "loses its innovative edge" ("Arvin" 180). And just earlier this year, Fleissner voiced a similar concern about graduate programs in American literature becoming "training factories" that endlessly reproduce "the self-aggrandizing tendencies of [. . .] moralized ideology critique" ("Historicism" 700). The fact Castiglia and Fleissner both slip into the language of radical oppositionalism in their discussions of Arvin and Chase suggests how deeply American literary studies is mired in ideology critique.

relation" to it (*Touching* 12). Sedgwick calls for a critical practice that would be "structured quite differently from the heroic, 'liberatory,' inescapably dualistic righteousness of hunting down and attacking" the "hegemonic" and valorizing the "emergent" or "subversive" (*Touching* 10). Elaborating Sedgwick's point here, Lauren Berlant has also criticized this "dialectical description" of political agency. "Critics interested in how structural forces materialize" in the texts they analyze, Berlant argues, have tended to treat those forces as a "world-homogenizing sovereign with coherent intentions." The text becomes either the mere "effect of powerful, impersonal forces," or "a singularity so radical" that it can "restructure the world that cannot fully saturate" it (Berlant 15). To put it more simply, the hegemonic-versus-subversive dialectic is a mode of analysis in which "one's choices narrow to accepting or refusing" (Sedgwick, *Touching* 13). And it thus effaces what Sedgwick has compellingly described as "the middle ranges of agency that offer space for effectual creativity and change" (*Touching* 13).

I aim to approach the romance with Melville through these "middle ranges of agency." Jay Grossman's compelling writing about Matthiessen has already exemplified what this approach might look like, even though his work actually predates what I've cited from Sedgwick and Berlant. Arguing that postwar heteronormativity "structures" Matthiessen's writing about sexuality, Grossman demonstrates how to "see an individual's perspective as inextricably—and unpredictably—linked to that of his culture, and thereby to witness a text (including

the 'text' and texture of the life) within frames larger than those of personal culpability or heroism" ("The Canon" 805). One could also argue that heteronormativity and other hegemonic ideologies—white literary nationalism, anti-communism, masculinism—"structure" all the postwar romances I write about. But just as Matthiessen, according to Grossman, reveals postwar heteronormativity as a "source of anguish and ambiguity," the critics and artists I analyze feel through, unravel, and fray these ideologies even as they advance them ("The Canon" 805).

Take, for instance, Richard Chase's strikingly violent pronouncement in his reading of *Billy Budd*: Vere's execution of Billy, Chase argues, demonstrates that "the passive, hermaphrodite youth [. . .] must continuously be killed" (*Herman Melville* 277). No doubt, the immense arsenal of anti-homophobic critique could be unloaded on this passage that unequivocally advocates for the repression of same-sex desire. Clearly Chase is in some profound way attached to a heteronormative ideology of what he calls "manly excellence" (283). But on a closer reading, this passage also describes the stubborn persistence of same-sex desire, such that it must be subdued *continuously*. This is certainly not a *critique* of heteronormativity, but it does unsettle the postwar fantasy that same-sex desire can be successfully repressed and that its repression would promote a stable democratic nation of healthy citizens. From this perspective, we see in this passage something more difficult and subtle than radical subversion. We see "the unraveling of a normative social convention," "the attrition of a fantasy," to borrow two rich phrases from Berlant (7,9). Rather than complicit

affirmation or absolute rejection, we see the conflicted language of one who is "overwhelmed [. . .] and yet also stuck" (Berlant 21).

In our moment of frustration with the radical posturing of critique, perhaps what is most salient about writers like Chase is that they consciously recognize their situatedness inside hegemonic ideologies. Ellison, for example, speaks of engaging in a tactical "guerilla warfare" with postwar racism, and his abiding loyalty to white canonical authors certainly kept him "in the lion's mouth," as Invisible Man's grandfather might have put it. Similarly, Chase claims to practice a "dissidence from within," a mode of ideological engagement that affirms national values—like heteronormativity—but also explores how those values "have produced much in human experience which has been damaging and cruel." "This is not," he writes, "for those who insist on purity or perfect rationality in their view of history or morals" (*America and The Intellectuals* 29-30). Attending to the political and moral impurity of the romance with Melville strikes me as an important and worthwhile challenge for our critique-weary field.

Melville and "Home Criticism"

Melville's writing readily lends itself to the "impurity" of the romance with Melville—its uneasy coupling of patriotic faith in American values with articulations of that democracy's exceptions, injustices, and cruelties. In what remains of this introduction, I aim to unpack this reciprocity by showing how Melville emerged from

an antebellum literary discourse whose ambitions and concerns in many important ways anticipate the hermeneutic practices of twentieth and twenty-first century American literary studies. The antebellum discourse I refer to is the Young America Movement.[9] Its major voices, including Melville himself, repeatedly articulate a preoccupation with literary nationalism and democracy—issues that continue to animate the work of even the most transnational and radical voices among the New Americanists. Melville's writing, as many critics have shown, betrays both sympathy with and distance from the Young Americans, and this ambivalence toward issues of nation and democracy has made Melville's writing remarkably useful to the heterogeneous projects of American literary studies.

As I've already suggested, the rich dialogue between Melville and American literary studies derives largely from their mutual preoccupation with literary nationalism and with the relationships between literature and democracy. Despite the major political upheavals in American literary studies—the radical politics of the Vietnam era, the ascendency of diversity studies, the current prevalence of transnationalism—Winfried Fluck has persuasively argued that "a striking continuity"

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[9] For detailed historical studies of the Young America Movement, See Widmer's *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* and Yonatan Eyal's *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861*.

links midcentury and contemporary scholars of American literature. The continuity, Fluck argues, is that Americanists past and present operate according to the Hegelian idea of the literary text as "a condensed expression of national identity" (8). Fluck maintains that regardless of raucous political disputations, most Americanists remain preoccupied with the "national representativeness" of the texts they study, and they use these texts to articulate accounts of "what America is really all about" (8).

Fluck's exposition of the methodological continuities in American literary studies is astute and provocative, but a preoccupation with the "national representativeness" of American literature dates back to long before the Myth and Symbol school (where Fluck's analysis begins). Benjamin Spencer's classic study of nineteenth-century American literary nationalism shows that this preoccupation goes back to foundation of the nation itself and "reached its crest in the mid-1840s." In this moment, Spencer shows, the Young Americans vociferously declared the importance of cultivating a specifically American literary tradition. But, more important for my argument here, they also articulated a nationally and democratically oriented literary critical agenda. Cornelius Matthews, an ardent Young American, succinctly expressed the literary priorities of the movement: "Home Writers, Home Writing, and Home Criticism" (quoted in Duyckinck, "Nationality" 270).

In the decades before the Civil War, numerous writers conceptualized and practiced what might be called "Home Criticism," interpreting the landscape, history, and literature of the U.S. as reflective of America's democratic institutions and

culture. George Bancroft's Hegelian historical epic, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Content* (1834) is an early, influential instance of this hermeneutic trope. For Bancroft, even pre-national moments—the Mayflower Compact, initial interactions between natives and colonists, King Phillip's War—represent "the germs of our institutions" (3). "Centuries before the Declaration of Independence," writes Jonathan Arac, "the 'United States' is made to live in Bancroft's pages" (Arac, *Narratives* 626).[10] Indeed, for Bancroft the 'United States' becomes the basis for a providential narrative of national development, from colonization to the divinely protected "present happiness and glory" of Jacksonian Democracy (4).

In the inaugural issue of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (1837), John O'Sullivan urges all American writers to follow Bancroft in illuminating the

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[10] Although I emphasize the importance of Bancroft's work here, during the 1830s and 40s several other writers produced influential "national narratives." Arac argues that writers such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Francis Parkman, William H. Prescott, James F. Cooper, and Washington Irving were all preoccupied with the project of constructing a "national narrative [that] told the story of the nation's colonial beginnings and looked forward to its future as model for the world." This narrative form, he shows, "began to take on its fully articulated form around the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1828-36)" (608).

artifacts of history with the light of democracy. The title of his essay evokes the core ideals of the Young Americans: "The Democratic Principle—The Importance of its Assertion to our Political System and Literature." O'Sullivan argues that "our national progress" depends on "the advocacy of that high and holy DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE," and he commits *The Democratic Review* to this purpose. "The vital principle of an American literature," O'Sullivan writes, "must be democracy," and the burden of American writers is to animate whatever they write about with this vital principle:

> All history has to be rewritten; political science and the whole scope of moral truth have to considered and illustrated in the light of the democratic principle. All old subjects of thought and all new questions arising [. . .] have to be taken up again and reexamined in this point of view.

O'Sullivan never clearly explains what exactly this democratic "point of view" consists of. But his argument that American writers should unpack the democratic significance of whatever it is they might be writing about resonates throughout both antebellum and twentieth-century American literary criticism.

This concern for a national literature and a democratically-focused reading community drives the Young America movement's ambitious literary project. At the center of this project was Evert Duyckinck, Melville's editor, publisher, and close friend. In 1845, Duyckinck became the literary editor of O'Sullivan's *Democratic*

Review, where he published a regular column called "Nationality and Literature." (Vanderbilt 61-62). Duyckinck's mantra was that America must produce a unique, "original" literature that reflects the emerging prowess of this young nation. As "the scepter of civilization" is handed to the U.S., he writes, American writing must "reflect the physical, moral, and intellectual virtues of the nation." [11] Several powerful writers of this moment express the same sentiment: James Russell Lowell proclaims himself as "the first poet who endeavored to express the American idea"; the Southerner William Gilmore Simms advocates for Americanism in literature; Emerson calls for awakening "the sluggard intellect of this continent" in "The American Scholar," a speech Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. called "our Declaration of Literary Independence"; and Margaret Fuller calls for an American literature with "genius as wide and full as our rivers, [. . .] and as impassioned as our vast prairies, routed in strength as the rocks on which the Puritan Fathers landed" (quoted in Vanderbilt 61-70).

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[11] Duyckinck's columns on "Nationality in Literature" often cite German literary history, particularly the work of Karl Wilhelm Frederick Schlegel. Jauss's succinct gloss of German nineteenth-century literary history makes clear why Duyckinck would have been so interested in it: it's primary "conviction," Jauss writes, is "that the idea of national individuality was the 'invisible part of every fact,' and that this idea made the form of history representable even in a series of literary works" (8).

But the promotion of a national literature was only half the battle, for, as Lowell famously puts it, "before we can have an American literature we must have an American criticism." Part of the goal of "American criticism," according to Duyckinck, is to "point out the American writers and writing most deeply imbued with a national spirit." Duyckinck also calls for a more involved hermeneutic practice that actively explicates the Americanness of U.S. literary production. He argues that American critics must "look to the writers of the land for the lineaments of its people, and trace the influence of its institutions." Using literature to understand national identity, drawing out literature's lineaments with civil institutions, and cultivating a democratic culture of literary interpretation—these prescient ambitions of the Young Americans deeply resonate with the priorities of twentieth century Americanists, and they prefigure what Fluck calls "the Romance with America" in American literary history.

These political and literary values of the Young Americans also resonate throughout much of Melville's writing. They are particularly apparent in his enthusiastic praise for Hawthorne in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," which Duyckinck published in 1849 just a few months after he had introduced Melville and Hawthorne.[12] This review of *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) echoes Duyckinck's

[12] Duyckinck published "Hawthorne and His Mosses" in the *Literary World*, a magazine he started when he left *The Democratic Review* in 1849.

sense that the ascending political power of the nation demands commensurate literary accomplishments: "While we are rapidly preparing for that political supremacy among the nations, which prophetically awaits us at the close of the present century; in a literary point of view we are deplorably unprepared for it" (1164). The problem, Melville claims, is not merely that America has no great literature. It is a matter of critical appreciation. He thus exhorts his readers to "recognize the meritorious writers who breathe that unshackled democratic spirit of Christianity in all things" (1164).

Melville proclaims that Hawthorne is just such a great American writer—an American genius who has surpassed even Shakespeare. But much more important than Hawthorne's proximity to the accomplishments of European literature is his Americanness: "The smell of your beeches and hemlocks is upon him; your own broad prairies are in his soul; and, if you travel away inland into his deep and noble nature, you will hear the far roar of his Niagara" (1165). "Hawthorne and His Mosses" thus provides an exemplary performance of Young American literary hermeneutics: it explicates and celebrates the "democratic spirit" and Americanness that, when we read correctly, shines forth from American literature.

Melville's creative writing also frequently testifies to his saturation in the Young America movement. The narrator of *Redburn* (1849), for instance, imagines all the peoples of the world uniting under the banner of American democracy: "We," Melville writes in reference to the national community, "are not a nation so much as a world" (169). Likewise, in *White-Jacket* (1850), Melville proclaims, "Long enough have

we been skeptics with regard to ourselves and doubted whether the political Messiah has come. But he has come in *us*" (153). And in one of the most frequently quoted passages from *Moby-Dick* (1851), Ishmael invokes "thou great democratic God" as his muse, and presents the *Pequod*'s crew as an embodiment of "democratic dignity." Most recent critics detect "more than a touch of irony" in Melville's nationalistic moments, many of which betray the imperialistic implications that underlie Young American patriotism and remind us that O'Sullivan also coined the portentous phrase "Manifest Destiny."[13] But even if we read these passages as satire, it is undeniable that Melville's writing is steeped in Young American values and rhetoric. Even after Melville notoriously attacks Duyckinck and the Young Americans in *Pierre* (1852), their ideals still permeate his later writing. *Clarel* (1876) contains lengthy discourses on democracy, and *Billy Budd* (posthumously published in 1924) begins with a sailor being impressed from ship suggestively titled "The Rights-of-Man."

But Melville's writing also shows a dark skepticism about the possibilities and practice of democracy in America. In stark contrast to O'Sullivan and Duyckinck's democratic triumphalism, Robert Milder compellingly argues that "democracy in

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[13] Wald and Levine both convincingly read "Hawthorne and His Mosses" with "more than touch of irony," to quote Levine, while Rogin reads it as an earnest "Young American literary manifesto." See Wald's *Constituting Americans* (125), Levine's *Dislocating Race and Nation* (148), and Rogin's *Subversive Genealogy* (74).

Melville's writing is not set against a backdrop of universal consonance; [. . .] it is set against a backdrop of blackness, or tragic dissonance" (51). Milder's emphasis on "blackness" here alludes to Melville's praise for Hawthorne's "great power of blackness." "It is that blackness in Hawthorne," Melville writes, "that so fixes and fascinates me"—"a blackness," he adds, "ten times black" (1158-59). Milder argues that Melville's emphasis on Hawthorne's "vision of life's blackness" marks a criticism of the Young America movement's call for a celebratory literature of national and democratic pride. Robert Levine and Pricilla Wald have argued that there is a "racialized" dimension to Melville's usage of "blackness" to affront the Young Americans (Wald 125). Melville's praise for literary "blackness," they argue, makes a subtle case for a literature that calls attention to those excluded from democracy in America—to "the whiteness inside and the blackness without," as Levine puts it (162).

As almost every Melvillean has noticed, Melville appears to be characterizing the "blackness" of his own work here. And it is Melville's complex entanglements of American pride with national cruelty—of democratic optimism with a tragic sense of democracy's exclusions and failures—that has made his work so uniquely useful to various projects of American literary criticism.

The Young Americans attacked Melville for precisely the features that would be celebrated during his "revival" in the 1920s. Duyckinck was "compelled to object to" Melville's later writing, due to its "piratical running down of creeds and opinions"

("Melville's *Moby Dick*" 41). The first revivals of Melville's work echo Duyckinck's reading of Melville's subversion of accepted ideas, but they reassess the value of this subversion. In his widely influential criticism of the "Genteel Tradition" in 1911, George Santayana had attacked American culture for having "few misgivings about the perfect health and the all-embracing genius of the nation" and for maintaining a "sentimental faith in liberty and democracy" (154, 156). To many writers in the 1920s, Melville's writing presented a compelling alternative to a culture they understood as arrogant, shallow, and individualist. Lauter is certainly right to argue that there was a great deal of highbrow elitism and nationalism in this modernist revival of Melville as an author who boldly repudiated the conventional pieties of his day. But Lauter's account neglects the fact that many revivers believed that the primary value of Melville's writing was its repudiations of national arrogance and naïve democratic optimism.

The first major studies of Melville all follow in the wake of Van Wyck Brooks's 1918 call for "creating a usable past" (337). Influenced by Santayana, Brooks confronted American critics for championing only books that "have passed the censorship of the commercial and moralistic mind" (338). This filtering, Brooks suggests, is "why we Americans have so neglected Herman Melville that there is no biography of him" (340). Writing just a few years later, Melville's first biographer, Raymond Weaver, makes clear from the beginnings of his book that Melville represents an alternative to an uncritical "Genteel Tradition." "Melville," he writes,

"sinned blackly against the orthodoxy of his time" (18). Likewise, Lewis Mumford, Melville's second biographer, claimed that Melville "plunged into the cold black depths of the spirit" and "questioned the foundations upon which their [American's] vast superstructure of comfort and complacency was erected" (*Herman Melville* xv). Melville thus emerged in the discourse of American criticism as a voice of opposition—as a deeply valuable resource for articulating one's objections to American culture.

Crucial to this emergence are D.H. Lawrence's extended readings of Melville in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923). Lawrence imagines Americans as having suppressed the most important dimensions of their own culture. Americans, he writes, see only "the democratic and the idealistic" in "the American utterance." Thus, he reasons, "they dodge their very own selves" (14). Lawrence's goal in writing the book is to "look through the surface of American art, and see the inner diabolism" (89). According to Lawrence, the most celebrated "classic" American authors—Franklin, Cooper, Emerson, Whitman—have hidden and hidden from this diabolism. But Melville's "writing is forever in revolt," and he is thus "America's greatest seer" (139). With *Moby-Dick*, Lawrence argues, Melville made one clear point: "Doom! Doom! Doom! We are doomed, doomed. And the doom is in America. [. . .] The *Pequod* went down. And the *Pequod* was the ship of the American soul" (169). More important than Lawrence's apocalyptic reading of *Moby-Dick* is his use of Melville to designate himself—the literary critic—as the excavator of the dark,

suppressed side of Americanness. Making explicit what Brooks, Weaver, and Mumford implied, Lawrence invests the interpreter of American literature with the prophetic power to see and articulate the "black," suppressed dimensions of American identity.

This idea of Melville's work as expressing a dark, suppressed, but profoundly valuable Americanness found its most foundation articulation in Matthiessen's discipline-shaping book, *American Renaissance* (1941). From the very beginning of this immense study, Matthiessen commits himself to exploring the "possibilities of democracy," and claims that the five writers he studies—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—produced a "literature for our democracy" (ix, xv). Patriotic as "literature for democracy" sounds, Matthiessen argued that returning to this body of work—particularly Melville—can actually mitigate America's national arrogance, which, Matthiessen writes, has "produced the blindest nationalism in art no less than in politics" (475). Matthiessen also believes that the project of democratic criticism can work against another "major problem in our culture"—namely, "the usual selfishness and indifference of our university men to political or social responsibility" (475). Countless Americanists over the past thirty years have rightly repudiated Matthiessen's reduction of "literature for democracy" to a short list of white, upper-middle-class, Protestant New England men. For good reasons, we have critiqued Matthiessen's exclusionary critical methodology and permanently exploded his hegemonic canon. But this revisionary work has been animated by

Matthiessen's own conviction that American literary criticism should be an anti-nationalistic, democratic practice—a conviction that continues to galvanize the radical ambitions of Americanists.

The democratic politics of *American Renaissance* emerge most distinctly in its book-length study of Melville. On several occasions, Melville's work provokes Matthiessen to denounce the inequalities that mark the failures of American democracy. Most of Melville's *corpus*, according to Matthiessen, is fundamentally committed to calling out the injustices of antebellum America: the exploitative practices of Christian missionaries in *Typee* and *Omoo*, the suffering of immigrants in *Redburn*, the flogging of sailors in *White-Jacket*. Matthiessen's one objection to Melville's politics is his brief, deeply unsatisfying reading of "Benito Cereno." Matthiessen follows other critics of the thirties in suggesting that Melville symbolizes "evil in the African crew" (508). He then critiques the novella's racial politics, arguing that it reflects "Melville's failure to reckon" with "the fact that they were slaves and evil had thus been originally done to them" (508). Matthiessen's interpretation of the slaves as "evil" is uncharacteristically imperceptive. But the point of the passage—that symbolizing slaves as evil wrongly effaces the evil of slavery itself—is consistent with the project of democratic criticism. Whether championing or critiquing Melville's writing, Matthiessen consistently uses it to articulate democratic political commentary.

A key political concern of *American Renaissance*—perhaps *the* key concern—drives Matthiessen's extended reading of *Moby-Dick*. In the book's final paragraph, which is all about Melville, Matthiessen describes this concern as "the tragedy of extreme individualism, the disasters of the selfish will" in conflict with "the Christian belief in equality and brotherhood" (656). In his reading, *Moby-Dick* dramatizes this tragedy. Ahab is "a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is a part." He "is prophetic of [. . .] the empire builders of the New World" (459). Matthiessen identifies a utopic alternative to Ahabian individualism in "the Whitmanesque comradeship between Ishmael and Queequeg," which, he argues, symbolizes "the transformative power of sympathy with another human being" (430, 443). This Melville-inspired fusion of Christian brotherhood with what Grossman has called "the erotics of democratic affiliation" is *American Renaissance*'s boldest statement of Matthiessen's career-spanning commitment to leftist politics and Christian socialism ("Autobiography" 54).

Matthiessen's moments of democratic criticism, however, are buried in long chapters that are most concerned with issues of genre and form. Perhaps Matthiessen buried these moments in an effort to professionalize American literary studies by bringing it into line with the ostensibly more "scientific" concerns of the New

Criticism.[14] But whatever the motivations, on a methodological level *American Renaissance* appears torn between political criticism and formal concerns "with what these books were as works of art," to quote his introduction (vii). In this introduction—which is all that many of Matthiessen's detractors cite—the project of democratic criticism sounds indistinguishable from the New Criticism's preoccupation with "the enduring requirements of great art" (xi). As Grossman aptly puts it, *American Renaissance* is "(de)formed by uneasy contradictions" between historical experience and "the canonical eternal" ("Autobiography" 48).

In the decade after *American Renaissance*, a diverse array of postwar writers expanded on Matthiessen's inchoate democratic criticism. These prescient but mostly ignored conversations about literature, democracy, and the office of the literary critic form the basis of the following three chapters. Each examines how Melville's work facilitated rich, contentious dialogue among academic Americanists and those who for various reasons occupied the fringes of the literary academy. These critics, intellectuals, and artists follow Matthiessen in using Melville to think through and write about the political stakes of sexuality, class, and race. But unlike Matthiessen,

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[14] To witness the New Criticism's claim to scientific precision and disciplinary professionalism, see John Crowe Ransom's widely influential essay, "Criticism, Inc." (1937), published four years before *American Renaissance.*

they address these issues forthrightly and make them the center of their readings of Melville's work.

Chapters Ahead

Chapter 2 describes how Melville elicited a remarkably explicit transatlantic conversation about male homosexuality in a heteronormative society. During the postwar moment—which David Johnson has called "the Lavender Scare"—homosexuals were aligned with Communists as dangerous threats to The American Way of Life, and exposure as a so-called "sex pervert" meant professional ostracism and criminal punishment. Under this heteronormative regime, Melville's life and work—especially *Billy Budd*—became a means of negotiating complex relationships with state homophobia. Even "the text itself" of *Billy Budd* was made to bear the marks of this moment in F. Barron Freeman's bowdlerized publication of the story (1948). Freeman's edition removed all of *Billy Budd*'s most sexually suggestive passages—a redaction that appears to have actually called the critical community's attention to such passages. Less than a year later, Newton Arvin and Richard Chase became the first critics to discuss Melville's homosexuality at length, and to argue that it is central to his work. Like Matthiessen, Arvin and Chase both write about the pleasures and political power of homoerotic relationships, especially in their readings of *Moby-Dick*, but they made explicit the homoeroticism that Matthiessen had only suggested.

The perhaps liberatory moments of their analyses, however, coexist uneasily with their admiration for the central character of *Billy Budd*, Captain Vere. For Arvin and Chase, Vere's execution of Billy, "the handsome sailor," came to represent a virtuous sacrifice of homoerotic affection for the sake of professional duty and state loyalty—a sacrifice that exemplified the discipline demanded of postwar intellectuals like themselves. Yet these critics also document the affective and political costs of Vere's cruel virtue: continuous self-torment, state violence, and yearning for redemption. This dissonance in Arvin and Chase's reading of Vere rises to crescendo, so to speak, in Benjamin Britten and E.M. Forster's collaborative opera of *Billy Budd* (1951). Britten and Forster dramatically exacerbate these critics' sense of Vere's emotional agony by extending his life into old age and recasting the narrative of the novella as Vere's recurring flashback. Their opera also explicitly engages the politics of state heteronormativity by elaborately repurposing and queering the name of the ship from which Billy was impressed: "The Rights of Man." Among these writers, *Billy Budd* thus became a sort of intellectual commons for exploring the emotional torment and punitive violence that state-enforced sexual repression demands.

Chapter 3 is about how C.L.R. James, just a couple years after this conversation about *Billy Budd,* utilized *Moby-Dick* in his effort to intervene in postwar American literary studies. James circulated his book about *Moby-Dick*, titled *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (1953), under extraordinary circumstances: he wrote and published it while imprisoned on Ellis Island awaiting deportation. He sent copies to

dozens of prominent literary critics and every U.S. congressman. As I've already mentioned, one of James's motivations for writing the book was to exhibit his expertise on "the Great American Novelist" (as James called Melville) as part of a strategic plea for U.S. citizenship. But *Mariners* and the letters he circulated with it also betray James's belief in the political importance of literary interpretation and his problems with the practices of postwar Americanists.

James was deeply concerned about the compliance of Americanists with what he saw as the snowballing totalitarianism of the U.S. government during the years after World War II—a totalitarianism that was evinced, he thought, by his own imprisonment. He does not mention Arvin or Chase's valorizations of Vere's dutiful conservativism, but on several occasions he compares postwar American intellectuals to Ishmael, suggesting that they complied with the U.S. government as Ishmael had complied with Ahab. This argument about Ishmael is part of James's larger reading of *Moby-Dick* as prophetic of the most salient political problems of the twentieth century: totalitarianism is represented in Ahab, the exploitation of the transnational working class in the *Pequod*'s crew, and the acquiescence of intellectuals in Ishmael.

In *Mariners* and his letters to critics, James sought to theorize what Matthiessen—whom James admired as a leftist critic—had left incoherent: the relationship between literature and radical political criticism. As James collapses the distance between literary interpretation and political critique—or as he put it, "between criticism and life"—he draws heavily on Marxist critics like Georg Lukács,

but he primarily focuses on figures who were already important to his audience of Americanists: Aristotle, Hegel, and even New Critics like I.A. Richards. In both his theorizing and his readings of *Moby-Dick,* James sought to galvanize the critical community to fight the anti-democratic Cold War immigration laws under which James himself was being deported.

My final chapter is about Ralph Ellison, who also strategically used Melville to garner a powerful audience and lend authority to his critical and creative output. The hypercanonicity of Melville's work in the postwar moment offered Ellison the opportunity to show that African Americans are integral to what he called "the tradition of American literature" and to carve out a place for himself within "that very powerful literary tradition" ("Initiation Rites" 525). Building on critical work by Sterling Brown and the clumsy racial politics of Matthiessen's work, Ellison's criticism and fiction use texts like *Moby-Dick*, "Bartleby," and "Benito Cereno" to reveal that American literature is fundamentally concerned with and informed by issues of racial injustice and inequality. Using Melville and the writings of other canonical figures like Emerson, Thoreau, Twain, and Faulkner, Ellison argues that black characters in American literature function as a generative force of democratic agitation—a force of "blackness" that negates any sense that America has lived up to its democratic promises.

Embracing a white canon may seem like a counterintuitive means of exposing the importance of African Americans to American literary and cultural history, but

Ellison was well aware of this irony. Indeed, more so than anyone else I write about here, Ellison was rigorously reflective about his literary critical identity and its power dynamics. In his essays and both of his novels, Melville's most subtle, tricky, and rhetorically skilled characters—Ahab, Babo, and the confidence man—become vehicles for critical self-reflection. I argue that Ellison takes up this critical interrogation most clearly through copious allusions to these characters in his unfinished second novel, published in 2010 as *Three Days Before the Shooting.*

From the Young Americans to the New Americanists

As it was in postwar discourse, the romance with Melville remains a powerful means of articulating the democratic aspirations of our field. It has persisted through the major reconfigurations of American literary studies since then, and its power and allure have not waned in the present critical moment. New Historicists have even further cemented Melville's national representativeness, some by presenting his work as a prophetic condemnation of American imperialistic exceptionalism, others by condemning his work for perpetuating its hegemony.[15] Many more sanguine critics

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[15] Spanos's recent reading of "Benito Cereno" exemplifies the former position. This text, he argues "is proleptic of America's future. [. . .]The character of Amasa Delano [is] a symbolic figuration of American national identity[. . . and] the myth of American exceptionalism that [. . .] has by and large determined America's national identity and its global role from the very beginning (*American Calling* 132).

have found that Melville's writings explore hopeful visions of democratic futurity—visions of racial egalitarianism[16] and queer democratic sociality.[17] Even though their

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Several influential critics of the past couple of decades have made similar arguments about Delano. James H. Kavanagh, for instance, claims that Delano exemplifies "imperial naiveté–one of the specific conditions of a peculiarly American imperialism" (275). Similarly, H. Bruce Franklin argues that Delano is a "representative American of his own time, of Melville's time, and of the time on the eve of our own century when the U.S. would achieve its 'manifest destiny' [. . .] and become a global empire" (203). The best examples of the latter position are Dimock and Powell, who both argue that Melville's work actually furthers American imperialism by justifying its violent expansionism. "Melville's authorial enterprise can be seen," writes, Dimock, "as a miniature version of the national enterprise [. . .], a miniature version of Manifest Destiny—understood here not as a specific set of events, but as an informing logic of freedom and domination" (10).

[16] See Toni Morrison's "Unspeakable Things," which I discuss in my conclusion, and Carolyn Karcher's *Shadow over the Promised Land.*

[17] See Robert K. Martin's *Hero, Captain and Stranger,* Castiglia's *Interior States,* especially the chapter on "Alienated Affection, Queer Sociality, and the Marvelous Interiors of American Romance," and Jennifer Greiman's *Democracy's Spectacle*,

political positionings are vastly different, these more contemporary romancers share with postwar Americanists a fundamental conviction about Melville: that his work signifies the fate of the nation and the possibilities of democracy.

By examining the history and critical genealogy of this conviction, I hope to in some sense *mark* the prevalent practice of bringing our questions of nation and democracy to the oracle of Melville. This widely practiced critical move calls our attention to the deep continuities across even the most contentious debates in our discipline's history. But, as Americanists continue to treat Melville's writing a key to understanding democracy in America, the deep history of this move—its participation in a hermeneutic tradition that extends back to Melville's own literary milieu, its central role in our field since its beginnings—tends to go unacknowledged. By illuminating this history, this dissertation seeks to interrogate the genealogical lineaments of Americanists' unique attachment to Melville's writing, and the political ends we seek as we continue to return to these writings. In so doing, I also hope to mitigate the reductive, often tiresome, but nonetheless deeply ingrained professional trend of seeking to transcend the ostensibly corrupt politics of one's critical predecessors.

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especially the chapter on "Theatricality, Strangeness, and Democracy in Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*."

Rather than critiquing the romance with Melville (or any other author) or calling for its end, I actually aim to enrich it by encouraging Americanists to practice the romance with a greater awareness and self-reflexivity concerning the history of this move and the desires that compel it. For the persistence of the romance sustains a privileged author function for Melville—a function with a long, politically multivalent history. The continuance of the romance is thus a trace of shared concerns that run through the deep history of American criticism. Melville's abiding allure for Americanists points to these buried continuities in this history—continuities that pose challenging, productive questions. Who are we such that Melville continues to mean so much to us? What's at stake in how we read and misread critical history? What kinds of criticism become possible if we read our critical predecessors in the spirit of care and empathy rather than the spirit of critique? I hope this dissertation will compel its readers toward such questions and open up an archive for exploring them.

Chapter 2

"if books are to be written":

Billy Budd and the discipline of American literary studies

the passive, hermaphrodite youth [. . .] must continuously be killed in the rite of sacrament if books are to be written or the man-of-war world sustained—or indeed, if life is to go on at all.

-Richard Chase, 1949

Betray one's self and lovers or betray the law and one's career: this dilemma of homosexuals at midcentury brought into sharp focus *Billy Budd*'s depiction of erotic affection among men constrained by the harsh laws of a repressive state. During this moment, Melville's incomplete, posthumously published story became a sort of intellectual commons for discussing the justifications and costs of homosexual repression. Editors working on the story's manuscripts, critics F.O. Matthiessen, Newton Arvin, a young Richard Chase, and artists E.M. Forster and Benjamin Britten, who collaborated on opera of *Billy Budd* in 1951— *Billy Budd* gathered these men separated by nation, profession, and conviction into a shared conversation. The novella offered them ways to conceptualize their subjectivity within a heteronormative disciplinary regime, and to write about the personal and political costs that such a regime exacts on those living beholden to it. These commentators on *Billy Budd* openly explore the pleasures of homosexual love and its power as a site of personal fulfillment and political resistance, yet their conversation also bears

disturbing marks of repression: the circulation of bowdlerized texts, images of slain objects of desire (such as the one in my epigraph), violent acts of self-disciplining, and tenuous expressions of redemption.[18]

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[18]As excellent work by several recent scholars has shown, the issue of homosexuality in American literature was a major concern for mid-century Americanists. Henry Abelove, Jay Grossman, Randall Fuller, and several others have revealed the profound importance of homosexuality to Matthiessen's foundational work, *American Renaissance* (1941), as Martin, Castiglia, and Werth have done for Arvin's influential books about Hawthorne (1929), Whitman (1938) and Melville (1950). Leslie Fiedler's "Come back to the raft ag'in, Huck Honey" (1948) is easily the most widely discussed treatment of homosexuality from this decade, but this notorious essay is only tangentially important to the work of the Melville scholars I'm analyzing here. Fiedler calls his topic "innocent homosexuality," by which he means non-physical, non-sexual, affectionate male-male partnerships. Christopher Looby suggests that Fiedler uses the term "homosexual" merely to "trade on the shock value of exposing the scandalous while insisting that the scandalous is actually innocent" (532). For the critics I discuss here, homosexuality is certainly not "innocent." They understood homosexuality as a powerful threat to state loyalty, to masculinity, and to their careers as intellectuals. Furthermore, Fiedler's essay does not discuss either of

All these renderings of *Billy Budd* emerged during the 1940s and early 50s—the beginning of what David K. Johnson describes as "the Lavender Scare." In this moment, Johnson shows, homosexuals were aligned with Communists as dangerous threats to the American Way of Life, and exposure as a so-called "sex pervert" meant professional ostracism and criminal punishment.[19] If the political propaganda of the

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the topics that form the basis for the conversation I am explicating, namely, sexual repression and *Billy Budd*.

[19] In his acclaimed book, *The Lavender Scare* (2006), Johnson uses the term to describe "the Cold War persecution of gays and lesbians in the federal government"—persecution that, he argues, equals if not surpasses the contemporaneous persecution of Communists and Leftists (2-3). Johnson shows that Democrat and Republican congress members began regularly expressing concern about homosexuals in public positions in 1947. Treating homosexuals as moral "perverts" and "security risks," the federal government fired "nearly six thousand civil servants" over the next two decades (2). Beginning in the late 1940s, the U.S. government thus branded homosexuality as a dangerous professional liability. Though Johnson's account of the Lavender Scare does not extend beyond the United States, the term could just as easily be applied to the state-sanctioned homophobia in Britain. Until 1967, homosexuality was a criminal offense punishable by

moment promised that the repression of homosexuality would lead to civic stability, mainstream psychology complemented this deeply heteronormative culture by promising that repression would bring psychic peace. Leading postwar American psychoanalysts, according to Henry Abelove, promised to "cure" homosexuality. [20] They believed "that homosexuality was an illness," he writes, "and that it could often be cured" (Abelove 18). One such analyst, Charles Socarides, argued that the only treatment for this illness was to accept "heterosexual pairings," the only sexual relations, he believed, that promise "cooperation, solace, stimulation, enrichment" (quoted on Abelove 18).[21] Many of the participants in the postwar conversation

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imprisonment in the UK, and it was illegal even to use the word on the BBC (Cooke, "Britten's *Billy Budd*" 27).

[20] Nathan G. Hale Jr. also argues that mainstream psychology in the U.S. at this time corroborated this culture of homophobia by "insist[ing] that homosexuality was inherently pathological, a deep disturbance of personality, and display[ing] a therapeutic zeal for its 'cure'" (298).

[21] This version of psychoanalysis is based less on Freud's writing about homosexuality in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and more on the later, "darker" Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). Based on these texts, many American psychoanalysts believed that the primary goal of analysis was the bring the patient into accord with "the reality

about *Billy Budd* transparently subscribe to and even defend this heteronormative fantasy, and, as I will show, their faith in it animates their valorizations of Captain Vere. Yet they also unravel this fantasy: in their readings of *Billy Budd,* sexual repression leads not to peace or stability, but to tortuous self-disciplining and violence.

During the Lavender Scare, *Billy Budd* thus became a site for both affirming postwar heteronormativity and unraveling its promises—for exploring the attrition of a fantasy within which one remains stuck.[22]

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principle." Lionel Trilling, who was deeply influential for many of the figures I discuss in this chapter, applied this version of Freud to art in his 1940 essay "Freud and Literature," which claimed that the primary function of art is "to reconcile men to the sacrifices they have made for culture's sake" (*Liberal* 46). This is also the interpretation of Freud that Herbert Marcuse excoriated in *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Explicitly attacking Trilling, Marcuse claimed that the real "function" of art—of psychoanalytic theory—is "a critique of the established reality principle" and an "eternal protest against the organization of life by the logic of domination" (133, 145).

[22] My language in this sentence borrows from Berlant's subtle language of political agency in *Cruel Optimism* (7, 9, 21).

Central to this conversation is Matthiessen's reading of *Billy Budd* in *American Renaissance* (1941), which galvanized critics and artists in the U.S. and England to mine *Billy Budd* for insight about masculinity, repression, and the discipline demanded of academic literary intellectuals. Subject to a "regime of heteronormative disciplinarity," Matthiessen, according to Jay Grossman's compelling research, wrote about and experienced homosexuality as a fundamentally fractured subjectivity—an identity that is characterized by, as Grossman puts it, "the interfusion of 'public' demands and 'private' propensities" ("The Canon" 824). Building on Grossman, Randall Fuller argues that Matthiessen was torn between his identities as "public intellectual and private homosexual"— neither of which he could comfortably inhabit (365, 368). Grossman and Fuller's essays examine textual traces of Matthiessen's fractured professional and sexual lives: his letters to his partner for twenty years, Russell Cheney; his homoerotic readings of *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*; and his conspicuous avoidance of these texts' most sexually powerful moments, "A Squeeze of the Hand" and "Calamus."

Yet Fuller and Grossman do not discuss *Billy Budd*, which moved Matthiessen along with several of his contemporaries to comment explicitly on the tension between maintaining a professional, masculine public identity and the desire for homoerotic love. Unlike *Moby-Dick*, Whitman's poetry, and the other texts that prompted post-war critics to write about homosexuality, *Billy Budd* centers on a character who consciously experiences a conflict between homoerotic affection and

professional duty: Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere. Melville describes Vere as a "conscientious disciplinarian"—a man who, even though he strictly adheres to his obligations as a captain in the King's service, also remains reflective and "intellectual" about what he sacrifices to maintain discipline. During the trial of Billy Budd, "the Handsome Sailor" who strikes dead the villainous Master-at-Arms John Claggart, Vere demands that his officers subdue "the feminine in man" and go through with Billy's execution. At the same time, as a man with "a marked leaning toward all things intellectual," Vere remains aware of the injustice and tragedy of sending a fundamentally innocent man to the yardarm (111).

This tension between "the feminine" and disciplinarity, between Vere's transparently homoerotic affection for Billy and his sense of professional obligation, deeply resonated for many postwar commentators on the story. As the burgeoning academic field of American literary studies took shape during this deeply homophobic moment, Vere's "conscientious" fulfillment of his "duty" became a catalyst for critics and artists to write about what it means to live beholden to "a regime of heteronormative disciplinarity"—an issue that they do not address quite so explicitly anywhere else in their work.

In the strikingly violent reading of *Billy Budd* represented in my epigraph, Chase presents Vere's execution of Billy as symbolic of a painful reality for professional writers: the writing of books, a project that he aligns with the maintenance of state power, demands the *continuous* killing of the "hermaphrodite

youth," the feminine, childish part of the self that Chase believes produces desire for other men. For Chase, Matthiessen, Arvin, and F. Barron Freeman, who bowdlerized *Billy Budd* in a widely cited 1948 publication, Vere represented a role model for the professional intellectual. The honorable captain's execution of Billy—his sacrifice of illicit love to professional duty and state loyalty—came to exemplify the discipline demanded of academic Americanists, a discipline that all these critics describe as tragic. For they also document the high costs of Vere's cruel virtue: violence to others, violence to the self, and a yearning for redemption. These influential critics published their conflicted accounts of *Billy Budd* in widely read books (in Chase and Arvin's case, published by trade presses) that at least in part inspired Britten and Forster's opera. In their rendering of the story, the dissonance in the critical consensus on Vere rises to crescendo, so to speak. Looking at the Americanists' approach to *Billy Budd* from afar—from across the Atlantic and from the perspective of artists, rather than professional critics— Britten and Forster exacerbated Vere's emotional torment, and overtly called attention to his repression of "the rights of man." If, as Sedgwick persuasively argues, *Billy Budd* is primarily concerned with "the operations necessary to deploy male-male desire as the glue rather than the solvent of hierarchical male disciplinary order," then these postwar writers interrogate such operations and expose their personal and political costs through representations of Captain Vere (*Epistemology* 94).

The "Testament of Acceptance" and the "Reassertion of the Heart"

In his introduction to the second edition of *Billy Budd* (1928), Raymond Weaver, Melville's first biographer, suggested a way of understanding Melville's final tale that prevailed among Melvilleans until the late 1950s: Melville had raged against heaven and earth in his early novels, but "with *Billy Budd* he would justify the ways of God to Man" (li). A year later, Lewis Mumford would elaborate Weaver's suggestive reading and argue that *Billy Budd* reveals that Melville had learned to "accept the world's conditions: those universal articles of war on which our civilization rests" and that he finally found "peace, the ultimate peace of resignation" (249). In 1933, E.L. Grant Watson crystallized this narrative of a rebellious young Melville grown world-weary and wise in his influential article about *Billy Budd*, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance." "Melville is no longer a rebel," Watson concludes from the novella (322). Matthiessen, Chase, and Arvin elaborate this "testament of acceptance" into a narrative of intellectual maturation, and they each unfold its unsettling implications of sexual repression.[23]

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[23] Variants of the "testament of acceptance" reading prevailed in *Billy Budd* criticism throughout the 1930s and 40s, but during the next decade, a strongly oppositional minority position took shape. In 1950, for example, Joseph Schiffman argued that *Billy Budd* was Melville's "final attack upon evil," and in 1953 Richard T. Stavig elaborated this position in his dissertation, which claimed that Melville's last story was a "protest against injustice" (Schiffman 128; Stavig 2). Phil Withim

Arguments for Captain Vere's mature, rational virtue lie at the heart of the "testament of acceptance" reading, and Matthiessen articulates precisely this claim in *American Renaissance*. Despite the tension between Vere's dutiful adherence to state authority and Matthiessen's ardently leftist politics, not to mention his homosexuality, Matthiessen presents Vere as an exemplary man of intellect. Indeed, Matthiessen first introduces Vere as a man with an "experienced and just mind"—a mind that is grounded in hard facts and moral right (508). Vere, Matthiessen continues, is "set apart from his fellow officers by 'a marked leaning toward everything intellectual,' especially for 'writers who [. . .] honestly and in the spirit of common sense, philosophize upon realities'" (508). Vere's astute intellect, Matthiessen suggests, results from his wise acceptance of "realities," and it is this realistic intellect that demands that he suppress "the heart" and execute Billy.

As will become apparent, however, Matthiessen's reading of *Billy Budd* is conflicted and uneasy. Vere's execution of Billy appears to directly repudiate the

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popularized this reading in 1959 in a direct response to Watson titled "Billy Budd: Testament of Resistance." These oppositional positions were unavailable to Britten and Forster as they wrote the opera, but their critical depiction of Vere was influenced by William Plomer, whose 1946 introduction to a British publication of *Billy Budd* anticipated the "resistance" reading by claiming that the novella was Melville's "final protest against the nature of things" (8).

"sympathy" and "comradeship" that Matthiessen found between Ishmael and Queequeg. "The one thing that would redeem 'the wolfish world,'" Matthiessen writes in his reading of *Moby-Dick*, "was sympathy with another human being. [. . . Melville] gave his full presentation of the transformative power of such feeling in the relation between Ishmael and Queequeg" (443). For Matthiessen, "the Whitmanesque comradeship between Ishmael and Queequeg" represents a radical alternative to Ahab's "self-enclosed individualism that [. . .] brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is a part" (431, 459). The phrase "Whitmanesque comradeship" testifies to the deep continuity between male love and leftist politics in *American Renaissance*.[24] Matthiessen's reading of Ishmael and Queequeg presents homoerotic love as the basis for a utopic, egalitarian community

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[24] As Grossman has pointed out, the leftist language of community, brotherhood, and "comradeship" that Matthiessen opposed to Ahabian individualism reiterates the language of "mutual sympathy" and "fellow feeling" that Matthiessen and his partner Russell Cheney use in personal letters to describe their homosexual relationship. Matthiessen's articulations of his leftist politics, in other words, were infused with the language of same-sex love (Grossman 52). For discussions of Matthiessen's connections with the left and the Popular Front, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, and Jonathan Arac, *Critical Genealogies*.

based on what Grossman eloquently calls "desire and the erotics of democratic affiliation"(53).

As Grossman observes, however, "*American Renaissance* is everywhere (de)formed by [. . .] uneasy contradictions," one of which is its treatment of erotic love between men (48). In some moments (such as his discussion of Queequeg and Ishmael), Matthiessen appears to treat such love as the basis for "democratic affiliation," and in others, writes Grossman, he "seems to ventriloquize and circulate the broader culture's phobic views of homosexuality" (*AR* refers to homosexuality as a "usual" stage of "boyhood," but as "pathological" in adults) (Grossman 48, 53). Fuller perceptively suggests that Matthiessen's larger project of cultivating national unity through the study of American literature led him to obfuscate both his sexuality and his more radical leftist commitments in order to "harmonize with rather than to challenge the nation's dominant ideals" (Fuller 378). This conflict between what we might call Matthiessen's "homosocialist" ideals and his goals as a literary intellectual makes for what Fuller calls "the tragic role of the American Scholar"— a role Matthiessen most explicitly outlines (and occupies) in his reading of *Billy Budd*.

Matthiessen's affirmations of "love," "mutual sympathy," and "the heart" in his concluding paragraphs about *Billy Budd* are so ebullient that one almost forgets that Vere does in fact go through with Billy's execution. Just a few paragraphs earlier, Matthiessen suggests that "the heart" is precisely what must be suppressed to execute Billy. He quotes Vere's repudiation of the lower officers' argument that Billy should

be spared: "the heart is the feminine in man, and hard through it be, she must be ruled out"' (509). If the heart is indeed "ruled out," as Billy's execution demands, how can we read the novella as Melville's "Reassertion of the Heart," as Matthiessen calls it in his chapter title?

It is only possible because of what Matthiessen calls Billy's "holy act of forgiveness"—an act that "redeems" Vere and allows him, while on his deathbed, "to murmur the words, 'Billy Budd,' but not in 'accents of remorse'" (512). Billy's act of forgiveness and Vere's ostensible redemption allow Matthiessen to read *Billy Budd* as reconciling the "just mind" with "the fervid heart" (511). These two seemingly antagonistic key terms of Matthiessen's analysis fuse in his final statement on Vere: "Without minimizing the justice of Vere's stern mind, Melville could feel that the deepest need for a rapaciously individualistic America was a radical affirmation of the heart" (513). This destructive American individualism "lacks juices," Matthiessen writes in his concluding sentences about *Billy Budd*, and "those juices could spring only from the 'depth of tenderness,' the 'boundless sympathy' [. . .] which Melville—for the phrases are his—had found" in Billy and Vere's relationship (514).

Matthiessen's oddly embodied image of "juices" is his only suggestion of an erotic connection between Vere and Billy, but these "juices" that spring from mutual "tenderness" and "sympathy" appear to efface and replace those that might have flowed between living bodies. As Grossman insightfully points out, Matthiessen's vaguely homoerotic reading of *Moby-Dick* also conspicuously effaces the material,

bodily juices—the tub of sperm—in which Ishmael and the crew squeeze hands and wash away their oath to Ahab ("Autobiography" 56). Despite this absence, Matthiessen's reading of *Moby-Dick* at least dimly suggests the democratic possibilities of "the very milk of human kindness," as Melville describes the tub of sperm (*Moby-Dick* 416). But his reading of Vere and Billy's so-called "affirmation of the heart" gravely compromises whatever political hope Matthiessen might have invested in Ishmael and Queequeg. For despite Matthiessen's language of "love" and "heart," this "affirmation" and its disembodied "juices" ultimately occur between an innocent "Handsome Sailor" and his disciplined executioner. In his reading of *Billy Budd,* Matthiessen thus seems to sacrifice his more radical democratic ideals in order to valorize Vere's—and by implication, Melville's—acceptance of the harsh discipline of the man-of-war world.

Matthiessen was the first to suggest this tension between Vere's homoerotic affection for Billy and the triumph of his virtuously disciplined intellect, and this tension is central to Arvin and Chase. Indeed, their readings of *Billy Budd* would unambiguously explicate the issues of same-sex desire, affective anguish, and punitive violence that Matthiessen's analysis at once raises and obscures.

"Baby Budd"

Before Arvin and Chase produced their overtly sexual readings of Melville's work, F. Barron Freeman edited and published an edition of *Billy Budd* that at once

called attention to the pervasive homoerotic themes of the novella and corroborated the idea of Vere as an exemplar of intellectual virtue and disciplined desire. Freeman's edition of *Billy Budd* was not published until 1948, but he had been working on the project as a dissertation at Harvard, where he studied with Matthiessen, since the late thirties (Hayford and Sealts 16).[25] Freeman's chief contribution to *Billy Budd*'s textual history is his "discovery" of "a twelve-thousand-word short story buried in the thirty-six-thousand word novel" (vi). According to Freeman, Melville significantly and clumsily "expanded" *Billy Budd* in the years "just before his death," and Freeman presents a text he calls "Baby Budd, Sailor" as the "original" (Freeman vi, 4, 67). This heavily redacted version of the story does not include the many passages of *Billy Budd* that call into question Vere's virtue and the justness of Billy execution. The surgeon's doubts about Vere's sanity, the crew's extolling of Billy after his death, and the narrator's comparisons between Vere and Claggart are all absent in "Baby Budd." Freeman's edition also includes a full version of *Billy Budd* (similar to those published by Weaver in 1924 and 1928), but his book-length introduction to the text unambiguously advocates for "Baby Budd" as the authoritative version—a restoration of Melville's original "artistic aim" (67). Ignoring the passages excluded from "Baby Budd," Freeman's introduction presents Vere as a representative of the

[25] As we learn in a footnote (page 500, n. 1), Matthiessen had relied on Freeman's then-unpublished editorial work in *American Renaissance*.

conscientious and measured mind: a "dignified and calm" "understanding arbiter," who "loves books and all things intellectual" and "realistically studies the relation of man and his fellow man" (73, 94, 97). Matthiessen, Chase, and Arvin all resonate with Freeman as they present Vere as an exemplary intellectual who performs the discipline of professional conduct while remaining mindful of love and affection.

But the most important feature of Freeman's "unexpanded" short story is certainly its complete omission of *Billy Budd's* most sexually suggestive language. Gone is Claggart's "touch of soft yearning, as if [he] could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban," as is Vere's desire to look upon Billy and his description of him as "a fine specimen of the *genus homo*, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the fall." Freeman never acknowledges that *Billy Budd*'s most homoerotic passages are missing from "Baby Budd," but their absence implies that he regarded them as late "expansions" and thus unimportant to Melville's original "artistic aim." It is worth noting here that later editors Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts Jr. found Freeman's editorial logic completely specious: "At no state of the composition of *Billy Budd* did Melville have a version constituting, corresponding to, or even approximating the text Freeman mistakenly presented" (17). Bound by no discernible features of the manuscripts, Freeman's decisions about which passages to elide powerfully demonstrate *Billy Budd*'s profound entanglement with the issue of homosexual repression in postwar American literary studies.

Given the strong-handed coercion of the archive by which Freeman excises homosexuality from the text of *Billy Budd*, it seems surprising at first that his introduction includes a forthright and lengthy discussion of "the homosexual implications in Claggart's relation to Billy" (83). Freeman argues that in the final edits to the manuscript, Melville adds hints of homosexuality to characterize Claggart, the Master-at-Arms whom Billy kills, as an "innately diabolic man with a twisted heart." Claggart's "natural depravity," Freeman claims, derives from his "perverted desire for the boy whose downfall he plotted" (Freeman 96-97). This diagnosis of Claggart as a pathological homosexual closely resembles how other postwar critics portray him, and it reinforces a distinction between the "warped mind of Claggart" and the "just mind" of Vere, to quote Matthiessen (507, 508). But Freeman ultimately only brings up the issue of homosexuality in order to dismiss it as a late preoccupation of an elderly Melville whose artistic prowess had waned—a preoccupation that the scholarly community should suppress. Even though Arvin and Chase rely on Freeman's edition, neither of them would accept his suggestion that homosexuality is unimportant to the "artistic aim" of Melville's final work. For they seem less invested in eliding the issue of homosexuality, as "Baby Budd" does, than in actively demonstrating its repression through readings of Vere's relationship with Billy.[26]

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[26] The most enthusiastic response to "Baby Budd" came from Charles Olson, who just a year before its publication had put out his own highly masculinist reading

Arvin, Chase, and the "anguish" of "manly excellence"

In their 1949 and 1950 trade press biographies of Melville, Chase and Arvin both tell a conflicted story of Melville's gradual sexual and emotional disciplining—a story in which Melville's later writing figures prominently, especially *Billy Budd*. They knew each other well and exchanged several letters about Melville, and their Melville books have many resemblances.[27] Most importantly, these books were the first to argue that homosexuality is a constitutive problematic for Melville's biography and his writing. Both also in many ways affirm the "Testament of Acceptance" consensus on Melville's later years. *Billy Budd*, as Arvin puts it, is "the work of a man who *wishes* to take his departure with a word of acceptance and reconciliation on his lips" (Arvin, *Melville* 292). But Arvin and Chase also color this sanguine reading with darker hues

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of *Moby-Dick* titled *Call Me Ishmael* (1947)—a book that, as Henry Abelove put it, argued that Melville's best work has "nothing to do with homosexuality" (64). *Call Me Ishmael* dismissed Melville's later work for its effeminacy and lack of "strength, " but in a glowing review of Freeman's book, Olson praises Freeman's edition for allowing him to enjoy Melville's last story more than ever before: "the very passages which have kept me from a toleration of the 'novel,'" he explains, "are what Freeman lists as the 'insertions' and 'drastic expansions' of the last two years" ("David" 112).

[27] For more about Arvin and Chase's relationship, see Castiglia's "Cold War" (223, 230-231).

of unresolved suffering and violence. They argue that writing about Vere's "strength and integrity," to quote Chase, actually inspired Melville's to "accept" sexual discipline. Even more overtly than Matthiessen, they both present this discipline as a virtuous model for intellectuals to imitate (Chase, *Melville* 295). But both also leave us a Melville (and a Vere) who dies a conflicted, anguished man—a man who *wishes* to accept the harsh laws of the world, but who continuously suffers under them.[28]

Their stories of Melville's homosexuality both begin with the special affection Melville felt toward Hawthorne, which Arvin narrates in great, albeit mostly imagined, detail. Upon first meeting Hawthorne, Arvin wrote in his biography of Hawthorne, Melville felt as though he had met "the one human being to whom he could utter his deepest intentions and betray his secretest fears" (*Hawthorne* 168). Several biographers had noted Melville's "deep intimacy" with Hawthorne—his feeling of having found "the affection of a sympathetic mind," to quote Mumford (*Melville* 133-134). But Arvin was unique in his unqualified celebration of Melville's erotic affection with Hawthorne. Arvin quotes Melville's imagery of penetration in his emphatic review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*: "He expands and deepens down the more I contemplate him," Melville writes of Hawthorne; "further and further, [he] shoots his strong New England roots into the hot soil of my

[28] Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical citations in this section refer to Arvin's *Herman Melville* (1950) or to Chase's *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (1949).

Southern Soul" (Melville, "Hawthorne" 1167). "It is an astonishingly sexual image," Arvin writes, "but probably only such an image could adequately have expressed Melville's feeling of receptiveness in the acceptance of impregnation by another mind" (*Melville* 138).

Arvin goes on to argue that this affection inspired Melville's homoerotically charged masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*. He then elaborates an overtly sexualized reading of Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg—a reading that extends Matthiessen's arguments, making explicit what *American Renaissance* had vaguely suggested. Ahab's vicious individualism, Arvin argues, ultimately derives from his repressive response to "a profound sexual injury," "an injury to the capacity for heterosexual love" (symbolized, Arvin thinks, by the loss of his leg to Moby Dick) (174). His impassioned hunt for the phallic white whale symbolizes his agonizing and destructive attempt to regain masculine potency—his "independent male principle," or "basic maleness," in Arvin's terms (172). As Arvin narrates Ahab's violent efforts to attain a lost masculinity and his destruction of himself and everyone around him in his futile quest, Ahab comes to embody the perils of sexual repression.

As an alternative to Ahab's self-denial and isolation, Arvin looks to what he calls "the creative dependency of fraternal emotion" in the erotic affection between Ishmael, Queequeg and the *Pequod*'s crew. Arvin's Ishmael also "suffers" from an "injury" to his heterosexuality, but he responds by embracing rather than repressing it, and he "preserve[s] his capacity for selfless love even though it is directed toward [.

. .] his own sex" (174). Ishmael begins the story like the repressed Ahab: "solitary and embittered" (174). But he learns to "yield to the outgoing affectionateness" of Queequeg and the crew:

> It is love that Ishmael deeply feels toward Queequeg, and it is the imagination of an even more comprehensive love that comes to him as he sits before a tub of cooling spermaceti, squeezing its congregated globules back into fragrant fluid, and washing his hands and heart, as he does so, of 'our horrible oath.' (181, 174)

Ishmael thus represents an "alternative to Ahab's egotism"—an alternative that fuses homoeroticism with a politics of "love," "affection," and community (181).

Arvin's boldly outspoken affirmations of same-sex sociality form the basis for Christopher Castiglia's recent celebration of Arvin's Melville biography as a "manifesto" for "queer socialism," and clearly Arvin's emphatic embrace of queer political sociality warrants such enthusiastic claims ("Arvin" 178). But Arvin's personal and political celebrations of homosexual love coexist uneasily with other passages that diagnose "homosexuality as an injury or illness," to quote Robert Martin ("Newton Arvin" 310). As the passages quoted above demonstrate, this language of "injury" made its way into even the most sexually progressive moments of the book. Arvin narrates a dark ending to the homoerotically inspiring intimacy that Melville felt for Hawthorne. Melville, he writes, felt "a sense of being somehow rejected" (206). According to Arvin, this sense of rejection left Melville with the

painful feeling that his affection for Hawthorne had been inappropriate and immature. Hawthorne's coldness, Arvin writes, brought Melville "to a despairing acceptance," as he began "to believe that his passionate need [was] a merely delusive one" (208, 256).

Arvin argues that it was not until he wrote *Clarel*—over twenty years after the height of his intimacy with Hawthorne—that Melville "came to accept the painful wisdom" of Hawthorne's rebuke (256). Arvin's point here is based in the episode between the poem's eponymous narrator and Vine, an alluring but reticent character who, according to Arvin, "is Hawthorne." In Arvin's description, Clarel is a young American traveling in the Holy Land and "seeking some fulfillment of his emotional needs." When he meets Vine, Clarel responds as Melville did to Hawthorne. He feels "a bond of quick sympathy," which Arvin reads as "a memorial of Melville's ancient need" (206). Like Hawthorne, Vine does not reciprocate Clarel's affection. Vine's "unspoken rebuke" to Clarel's advances, Arvin writes, teaches Clarel that "there is something amiss about such intense emotions in a man who is already, as Clarel is, engaged to be married" (208). Chase concurs with Arvin about Vine's lesson in masculine heterosexuality. "This rebuke," Chase writes, is "part of Clarel's education, and "leads him to ask himself how he could have found place in his heart" for such a "feminine, passionate desire" (247).

For Arvin and Chase both, Captain Vere embodies the virtuous but cruel discipline that Melville learns in his mature later years. Arvin notes that Vere feels "a

spontaneous affection" for Billy and that he is "drawn emotionally" to him, as Melville had been drawn to Hawthorne (296). Arvin also quotes a few passages that Freeman had removed to evidence Vere's attraction to Billy: he notes that Vere is keen on Billy's "physical beauty," and he quotes Vere's suggestive claim that "in the nude" Billy would resemble a "young Adam before the fall" (294). Arvin actually cites the narrative of "Baby Budd" growing into *Billy Budd*, but, contrary to Freeman, he praises the "expansions" as "enriching its inner interests" (292). For Arvin, these "inner interests" of the story are its explorations of the tension between deviant sexual desire and the obligations of intellectual life, rationality, and professional duty—a tension that Arvin traces throughout Melville's life and work. Earlier in the biography, Arvin had argued that Melville had experienced a "revulsion" from "the culture of Europe and America," due to this culture's "literate rationalism outstripping and losing touch with its emotional and imaginative needs" (54). Arvin's term "literate rationalism" evokes the life of the literary intellectual, and in this context it suggests that such a life was hostile to the sensuality and homoeroticism that Melville had experienced while at sea. This tension between intellectual life and homoerotic affection becomes paramount in Arvin's reading of *Billy Budd*.[29]

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[29] As Arvin wrote about *Billy Budd* during the late 1940s, this tension between the professional intellect and same-sex desire manifested itself in Arvin's own life. Away from Smith College (where he taught) and the world of professional criticism,

Arvin seems to have enjoyed relatively open relationships with men, particularly around the elite Yaddo artist community where he served on the board of trustees and was a "director in residence" (Werth 92). Having taught for several years and already published acclaimed books about Hawthorne (1929) and Whitman (1937), Arvin seemed to hold a secure position in the academy. But in 1949, it was revealed that Yaddo was under investigation by the FBI for housing Communists, and that undercover agents had already infiltrated the community (Werth 114). As Arvin's biographer Barry Werth recounts, Arvin became deeply fearful of being exposed as a Communist sympathizer, and, much worse, a homosexual. "After a perilous brush with exposure and blame," Werth writes, Arvin felt "that he had no choice but to go on living and working in shadow" (117). After the investigations began at Yaddo, Arvin distanced himself from his then lover, Truman Capote, and again submitted himself to psychiatric treatment for homosexuality (Werth 113-115). Arvin, as Martin writes, understood that "his job, his reputation, perhaps even his friendships depended upon the absence of any public recognition of his homosexuality" ("Newton Arvin" 313). Arvin's abiding efforts to conceal his homosexuality came to a nightmarish end in 1960, when "obscene" materials (muscle magazines, mostly) were found in his apartment and he was prosecuted in a high-profile trial for possession of pornography and "lewdness." Two other Smith faculty members who exchanged the erotic materials with Arvin were also arrested, and Arvin testified

When Arvin first introduces Vere, he appears to subscribe to Matthiessen's argument that Vere effectively synthesizes the "heart" and the "just mind," but this synthesis quickly frays. Initially Arvin presents Vere as a virtuous alternative to the malicious Claggart. Arvin notes that "intellectually, [Claggart] is a man of marked superiority," but "neither goodness nor love," Arvin writes, "can flourish in a nature 'dominated by intellectuality,' as Claggart's is" (298). Yet Vere, also "'a man with a leaning toward everything intellectual' and passion for books and learning," appears to represent the possibility of bringing together the intellect and the heart: he is said to demonstrate that "love" is "not irrevocably at war with the life of the mind" (298). Vere, Arvin writes, "is an image of the high virtue in which the sternest sense of severe and painful duty is united to a capacity for the purest and tenderest love." But in going through with Billy's execution, Arvin writes, "Vere must suppress the heart within him"; for he "does not turn aside from his duty, anguishing though it is." Shortly after the execution, Vere dies in "agony," Arvin writes, "with Billy's name on his lips" (296). Arvin's repeated returns to Vere's agony and anguish up until his death ultimately unravel the synthesis between love and intellect that Vere had

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against them both. All three lost their teaching positions. For detailed accounts of Arvin and the others' trials and dismissal from Smith, see Robert K. Martin's "Newton Arvin, Literary Critic and Lewd Person" and the last few chapters of Barry Werth's excellent biography of Arvin, *The Scarlet Professor*.

appeared to embody. This synthesis promised "love" and "peace" to those who fulfill their "painful duty," but Arvin's dismal narrative of Vere's suffering and death suggests that this promise is a cruel fantasy.

As it is for Arvin, homosexuality is central to Chase's understanding of Melville's life and writing. Chase too tells a story of Melville painfully learning to control his homoerotic urges. But even more than Arvin, Chase articulates a tortuous narrative of violent self-disciplining. Melville, according to Chase, struggles with homosexual desire throughout his adult life. Like Arvin, Chase several times refers to same-sex desire as a "malady," "an abiding neurosis," that must be conquered (293). As a married man trying to live in accord with his world, Chase's Melville suffered great "sickness and confusion": "[he] suffered bitterly from his inevitable sense of being celibate, the more so because he was apparently a man of powerful erotic urges." Despite the power of these urges, Melville models how to repress them, for "Melville's strain of homosexualism was entirely subdued" (295).[30] But Chase does not shy away from the anguish and violence of the work of repression, as his reading of *Billy Budd* makes painfully clear.

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[30] The word "homosexualism," which Chase uses a number of times, presents same-sex desire as a dangerous ideology that threatens America—a threat comparable to the other subversive "isms" of his book ("Communism," "liberal progressivism," and "Stalinism").

The larger project of Chase's book is to argue that Melville's mature "acceptance" of "the man-of-war world," as he puts it in his reading of *Billy Budd*, can form the foundation of the increasingly centrist, pro-American politics of the New York intellectuals at mid-century.[31] In his first paragraph, Chase claims that the goal of his book is to articulate a "New Liberalism" that will "ransom liberalism from the ruinous sellouts, failures, and defeats of the thirties" (vii). A generation younger than the leftists of the 1930s—like Matthiessen and Arvin—Chase began his career as a critic just as intellectuals in the U.S. were abandoning Communism. In 1943, he received his Ph.D. from Columbia, where he worked with one the most well-known representatives of leftist disenchantment, Lionel Trilling. Chase's Melville biography was his first book with a major press, and in it he clearly sets out to repudiate the "liberal progressivism" of the thirties, which he characterizes as an impossibly idealistic moral perfectionism that sacrifices family and community for a false ideal of

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[31] Phillip Rahv documented this intellectual movement away from radicalism in a 1952 special issue of the *Partisan Review*. Speaking of the intellectual culture surrounding the journal, he wrote, "the mood has gradually shifted from opposition to acceptance. Intellectuals have become more open to the persuasions of actuality." *Partisan Review* XIX (May-June 1952): 304. For a detailed historical account of this shift toward conservative "acceptance," see Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: The American Intellectuals of the 1940s and 1950s.*

an egalitarian society. Echoing Trilling, Chase argues that this "progressive" liberalism can lead to "Communist Totalitarianism," and, intentionally or not, it ultimately bolsters Stalinism (vii). While the New Liberal accepts the unchangeable "imperfections of life," the progressive liberal fights fiercely and futilely against them, violently fracturing civilization into chaos (viii). Appealing to a Hobbesian conservatism, Chase presents the progressive liberal as "lopping and cutting and severing the great body of the Leviathan until all life is hacked out" (302). New Liberalism, a counterintuitive synthesis of state loyalty and what Chase calls "heroic democracy," exhorts us to accept "the American way of life"—to "love Leviathan," and embrace heterosexual family life, devoted citizenship, and communal unity.[32]

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[32] Chase does not name any "liberal progressives" of the thirties, but his language clearly implicates Granville Hicks, Arvin's earlier writing, and, most of all, Matthiessen—all of whom were directly involved with various dimensions of the American Communist Party throughout the thirties. Chase's dismissal of Matthiessen's leftist politics is most clear in his claim that liberal progressivism naively romanticizes a false ideal of "a well meaning 'common man' extending his hand in brotherhood." In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen had argued that "the literature for democracy" produced by America's best writers was characterized by a concern to portray "the common man in his heroic stature" (xvi). For Chase, the "heroic common man" was a myth of Stalinist propaganda, and thus a threat to the

Chase presents Melville's writing as a sort of moral compass of masculine virtue that can guide young American men through a dangerous world. Melville is "a profound and prophetic critic of liberal progressivism," argues Chase, and his body of work dramatizes the virtues of the New Liberal and the temptations that could beset him (xi). We learn that Melville's work is characterized by a lost figure, an Ishmael, searching for the "American Man"—a masculine "heroic personality" to guide the young American through a world that threatens to "unman" him. To provide such guidance, Melville presents a figure Chase calls "the True Prometheus": a representative of "strength, wealth, authority, majesty, and *intellect*" (35, my emphasis). This image of virtue appears dimly in the narrator of "Bartleby" and in Bulkington, the heroic member of the *Pequod*'s crew, but it is most perfectly

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democratic state. In an immensely helpful article, Geraldine Murphy argues that the political differences between Matthiessen and Chase manifested themselves in their characterizations of Billy Budd: Matthiessen regarded him as a heroic, Christ-like common man, while Chase describes him as emasculated ("unmanned") and childish—"a pathetic naïf and psychological misfit," in Murphy's paraphrase (362). Murphy perceptively claims that Chase's work on Melville and New Liberalism betrays an "anti-Communist machismo" (375). I would merely add that Chase's writing on homosexuality ought to be read as intensely interrelated with this New Liberal masculinity.

embodied by Captain Edward Fairfax Vere. These characters, Chase argues, exemplify human grandeur, uphold "the standards of manly excellence," and affirm loyalty to community and state. They are thus models for citizenship in what Chase calls "a heroic democracy in which man would be free, frank, and proud" (283).

Unlike Matthiessen and Arvin, about whose homosexuality much has been written, little is known about Chase's sexual identity, other than that he was married. What is clear is that Chase seems painfully aware that the virtue of "manly excellence" exacts profound costs on its exemplars. It cannot be attained, Chase writes, "without great suffering and without overcoming the hazard of false seductive images which seek to unman him" (278). One "seductive image" Chase seems particularly concerned about is the "hermaphrodite youth," who haunts Melville's writings in the forms of Harry Bolton, the sailors around the tub of sperm, and Billy Budd.

Chase understands much of Melville's fiction as dramatizing the painful work of repressing "the hermaphrodite youth." His readings often emphasize men resisting this dangerous figure. Redburn is attracted to the effeminate and weak Harry Bolton, Ishmael shares a "blissful bed" with Queequeg, the *Pequod*'s crew squeeze "liquid sperm and accidently squeeze each others' hands," Clarel is attracted to Vine, Vere loves and desires Billy—these relationships, Chase says, all bear witness to Melville's lifelong struggle with desire for men. But these characters' tragic severances from each other teach an important lesson: such relationships are merely "fantasies of

attachment" that can exist only within "illusions of isolation" from the realities of the man-of-war world (288-89). Bolton, "the homosexual youth who was doomed," is "crushed to death between a ship and a slain whale"; Ishmael and the crew are destroyed in the vortex of Ahab; Clarel is "rebuked" by Vine; and, in Melville's "final statement" on the matter, Billy is executed by Vere, who comes to exemplify New Liberal masculine citizenship (9, 247, 268).

According to Chase, these stories of homoerotic love rejected and destroyed represent the fruits of Melville's life of austere repression. Such stories, especially Vere's, "enabled him to pass through" the depression of his "celibate" adulthood with his wife and family. "Captain Vere," Chase writes, is "the image of strength and integrity which Melville kept before him in the years of sickness and confusion" (295). Like Melville, Vere has a "vein of fantasy," a phrase which in Chase's lexicon is clearly homoerotic. But Vere is also a "realist," Chase says. Despite his "fantasies of attachment" with other men, Vere remains "a man committed to the ways of the world," who "knew the social necessity of forms" (297-298). A man who loved and desired other men, but who understood his duty to his community and executed its laws—"such was this speaker of truth with whom Melville identified himself" (298). For Chase, *Billy Budd* becomes the story of a Handsome Sailor who is "rebuffed and sacrificed" by "a respectable man," and as such, a guide to help Melville's readers "pass through" the trials of repression.

Chase more than once uses striking language of self-mutilation and tormented violence to describe the repression of the "hermaphrodite youth." Here is Chase's symbolic reading of Vere's execution of Billy: "Vere, heroic as he is, must repeatedly return to his own childhood to feed on it and murder it. For him there is no other way of supporting, or nourishing, the structure of consciousness, order, authority, and legality which constitutes the man-of-war world." This idea of repeatedly killing an immature, homoerotically-inclined part of the self to fortify state power recurs in a parallel passage about Melville himself (from which I draw my epigraph).

> Melville is overwhelmingly moved with pity for the passive, hermaphrodite youth, an image of himself, who must continuously be killed in the rite of sacrament if books are to be written, or the man-of-war world sustained—or indeed, if life is to go on at all. (277)

These passages make it clear that Chase finds no "affirmation of the heart," no redemption for Vere, and no late-found serenity in "acceptance" for Melville. Chase's adverbs—*repeatedly*, *continuously*—suggest that the painful work of subduing "the hermaphrodite youth" is never complete. His language of "rite" and "sacrament" implies the necessity of ritually sacrificing this dangerous homoerotic figure. This passage's conditional, "if books are to be written," suggests that the hermaphrodite youth threatens even the work of intellectuals, who seem especially important to Chase's militarized state. Melville's composition of *Billy Budd* becomes a

model for what all writing should do: namely, to elaborate what Chase calls "the painful acts of will" mandated by "the man-of-war world." (277).[33]

Like Matthiessen, Arvin and Chase both valorize Vere's execution of the Handsome Sailor, producing what seems to be precisely the kind of writing that Chase's man-of-war world demands. Despite important political differences between these critics, they each appear to affirm postwar fears of homosexuality. More than a few moments of their analyses identify same-sex desire as an "injury" to the self and as a threat to the state. And they both present Vere as a role model for the painful work of repression—a role model especially important for intellectuals like themselves. But against the grain of this surface, these critics—especially Chase—give voice to the anguish and violence that attend sexual repression, and the stubborn persistence of same-sex desire, such that it must be subdued *continuously*. Arvin and Chase did not *critique* heteronormativity, but their body of criticism antagonizes the postwar fantasy that same-sex desire can be successfully repressed and that its repression would promote a stable democratic nation of healthy citizens.

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[33] Chase echoes this politically conservative reading of *Billy Budd* in his well-known book, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), though here he does not mention "homosexualism" at all. *Billy Budd*, he writes, "dramatizes the conservative idea that society must follow a middle way of expediency and compromise" (*American Novel* 114).

Billy Budd and "The Rights of Man"

Chase's explication of Vere's involvement in state violence and his intense emotional suffering resonates throughout Forester and Britten's opera, which revises *Billy Budd* to amplify these very issues. The question of Vere's relationship with democratic values represents a primary concern of Britten, Forster, and Eric Crozier's 1951 opera of *Billy Budd*, which repeatedly stresses the name of the merchant ship from which Billy was impressed into His Majesty's service: *The Rights-of-Man*.[34] Surprisingly, Chase and the other critics had completely ignored this allusive name. Given their numerous affirmations of "literature for democracy," one cannot help wondering: why did these democratically-minded critics never even mention Melville's obvious reference to the central document of the French Revolution? Any answer to this question would be speculation, but the opera's elaborate repurposing of the phrase "rights of man" is suggestive. For the opera implies that Billy's symbolic relationship with "the rights of man" cannot be stressed without implicating

[34] Letters between Britten, Crozier, Forster and their correspondents show that the three of them worked together on establishing the basic sequence of the events in the opera. Forster, as "primary librettist," wrote the lines as Crozier, in his own words, "provided technical fodder." Britten set their work to music (*Letters from a Life* 496-98).

Vere in the suppression of the democratic values that Matthiessen, Chase, and Arvin all wish to affirm.

The importance of "the Rights of Man" to the opera's plot marks a significant departure from the novella. In Melville, Vere's officers show only the slightest concern about Billy shouting, "Goodbye, Rights-of-Man," as he joins them on the *Indomitable* (140). The opera augments the significance of Billy's farewell by repeatedly reminding the viewer that the British, loyal to their king, are at war with the revolutionary French. The officers express deep concern about "the young chap who shouted 'rights o' man'"—a "dangerous one," they call him. "He needs to be watched. 'Rights of Man' indeed!" (17). And Claggart, when he accuses Billy of mutiny, claims that he has been "spreading the infamous creed of 'the Rights of Man'" (Britten 53). Within the world of the opera, Billy (unbeknownst to him) comes to embody the "rights of man," and his execution becomes an explicit quashing of this "infamous creed."

For the concerned officers, especially Claggart, the subversive power of "the rights of man" largely derives from the homoerotic energy that they associate with Frenchness, Billy, and his effect on the other crew members. The officers' warning to Vere of Billy's danger emerges from their larger fear of French ideas undermining their authority on the *Indomitable*. "Don't like the French," they repeat in a patriotic conversation with Vere about the imminent threat of their enemy. "Their notions don't suit us nor their ideas. Nor their hipity skipity ways." These dangerously "hipity

skipity" ways stand in stark contrast with their own nation's masculine alternative: "British brawn and beef"(Britten 26). This demeaning emasculation of Frenchness, which the librettist put in the mouths of Vere's officers, resonates with Martin's comment on Arvin's use of French in a journal about his lovers: "French was in the 1950s a kind of gay language [. . .] that of Marcel Proust, André Gide, and Jean Cocteau" (298, "Arvin").

The threat that Billy and the rights of man pose to the masculine power structure of the *Indomitable* is elaborated at length by Claggart. The brooding master-at-arms appears to realize Billy's danger as he becomes aware of his own attraction to Billy. Claggart witnesses Billy successfully defend himself against another sailor's assault, and after he breaks up the fight, Claggart compliments Billy with a phrase lifted directly from Melville: "Handsomely done, my lad, and handsome is as handsome did it too." In the novella, Claggart uses this phrase ironically to mock Billy for spilling his soup, but in the opera Claggart seems earnestly impressed by Billy's performance as a pugilist. He follows Billy back to his hammock after the fight, repeating the phrase, "Handsomely done, my lad, handsome indeed," and he eventually repeats it slowly and softly into Billy's ear as he lingers just over his shoulder (Britten 32-33). As Claggart returns to the deck, he commits himself to Billy's destruction in a tortured aria:

> beauty, handsomeness, goodness, would that I never encountered you!

> [. . .]Having seen you what choice remains to me? None! None! I'm doomed to annihilate you. I'm vowed to your destruction [. . .] I, John Claggart, Master-at-Arms of the *Indomitable*, have you in my power and I will destroy you. (Britten 33-34)

The aria makes explicit what Melville had only intimated: Claggart is painfully conscious of his sexual desire for Billy, and he understands that this desire subverts the order of the man-of-war. In the final line of the aria (quoted above), Claggart invokes his position as master-at-arms, the officer responsible for maintaining order and preventing mutiny, to fortify his commitment to Billy's destruction. Having understood that Billy and the "rights of man" he comes to represent are absolutely irreconcilable with the masculine order of the man-of-war, Claggart realizes, you might say, that the hermaphrodite youth must be killed.[35]

The erotic character of Billy's threat to the *Indomitable* lies just beneath the surface of Claggart's warning to Vere about the "the Handsome Sailor" who is mutinously "spreading the infamous creed of the rights of man." As he does in the novella, Vere immediately rebukes Claggart's accusations. Yet Claggart persists: "He is deep," he warns, "you do but note his outwards, the flower of masculine beauty

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[35] It is worth nothing that Claggart's aria, which contains the most palpably homoerotic lines of the opera, was deleted from a broadcast of *Billy Budd* on American television in 1952 (Reed, "Billy Budd on television" 152).

and strength. [. . .] A mantrap lurks under those ruddy-tipped daisies" (Britten 50). When prefaced by an expression of Billy's "beauty and strength," Claggart's use of "mantrap," usually applied to a woman who ensnares men, suggests that it is precisely Billy's appeal to Vere and the other sailors that makes him so dangerous. As the mutinous instigator of both homoerotic affection and the rights of man, Billy must hang.

Claggart's accusations outrage Vere: "John Claggart! Beware! I am not so easily deceived," he sings in a triumphant major key (Britten 52). But after Billy strikes Claggart dead, Vere, as one Britten critic put it, grows "every bit as destructive as his less ambiguously gay (and evil) master-at-arms" (Brett 113). The librettists make this point explicit as Vere, just after Billy lays his deadly blow, sings the very words of Claggart's foreboding aria: "Beauty, handsomeness, goodness, coming to trial" (Britten 54). During the trial, Vere remains silent with his head bowed as the officers decide to execute Billy without much ado—unlike in the novella, in which Vere pushes the officers toward executing Billy—a revision that emphasizes Vere's moral weakness and his inability to act on his convictions. Vere reluctantly "accepts their verdict," and again repeats the refrain of Claggart's vow to kill Billy: "Beauty, handsomeness, goodness, it is for me to destroy you" (Britten 59). The opera thus stresses that Vere, despite his initial repudiation of Claggart, ultimately carries out the master-at-arms' vow to suppress the rights of man.

The theme of the repressed, suffering homosexual male, unable to act on his convictions and desires, was an abiding concern for Britten, as his operas of *Peter Grimes* (1945) and *Death in Venice* (1973) testify.[36] Britten was himself a homosexual in a long-term but closeted relationship with tenor Peter Pears, who played Vere in *Billy Budd*'s debut. According to Brett, Britten's concern with this theme was largely inspired by W.H. Auden, who was a close friend to Britten in the 1930s. Firmly convinced "of the evil effects of repression and self-control," Auden, Brett shows, encouraged a young, prudish Britten to embrace his sexuality (Brett 193). "To my friend, Benjamin Britten, composer," Auden writes in *Letters from Iceland* (1937), "I beg / That fortune send him soon a passionate affair" (quoted in Brett 193). Even though they were out of touch as Britten wrote *Billy Budd*, Auden's progressive sexuality, according to Brett, inspired Britten's interest in writing about the "evil" and suffering in the lives of repressed homosexuals like Claggart and Vere.[37]

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[36] For instructive analyses of Britten's exploration of homosexual repression in his operas, see Brett's essays, "Sex, Politics, and Violence in the Librettos of *Peter Grimes*," "Britten's Dreams," and "Pacifism, Political Action, and Artistic Endeavor" in *Music and Sexuality in Britten.*

[37] Auden briefly mentioned homosexuality in *Billy Budd* in his book *The Enchafèd Flood: the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (1950). I do not write about this book here because Auden's comments on *Billy Budd* are unfortunately brief and his

A more immediate influence on the opera's exploration of repression was the sexually-inflected, democratic politics of Forster, whose essay "What I believe" (1939) discusses the same tensions between human connection and state loyalty addressed in *Billy Budd*. Here Forster articulates his tentative commitment to democracy ("Two cheers [for democracy] are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three") along with his more robust belief in "personal relationships" (70, 67). According to the essay's impressionistic logic, Vere is faced with a democratic dilemma: betray his personal connection and conviction, or betray his duty to His Majesty and the man-of-war world. Forster believes that the affirmation of such "personal relationships" among "the sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky" represents "the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos" (73). Though he doesn't mention sexuality explicitly, he does say that the personal relationships he believes in demand that people not "thwart their bodies, since bodies are the instruments through which we register and enjoy the world" (74). Forster had wanted to write about homoerotic relationships more explicitly: when he began working on the opera in the 1940s, he had not written fiction since 1924, due to his "weariness of the only subject I both can and may treat—the love of men for women

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mentioning of homosexuality is confined to a short footnote about Claggart (see page 146).

and vice-versa" (quoted in Oliver, *Britten* 140).[38] *Billy Budd* offered Forster a homoerotic context in which he could explore the emotional and political repercussions of betraying the "personal relationships" that he so deeply valued.

In a BBC interview, Forster, Britten, and Crozier all express dissatisfaction with the pervasive approval of Vere's actions among Melville critics. They do not name the critics with whom they disagree, but they do quote Raymond Weaver to sum up the "testament of acceptance" school, which, Crozier says, holds that "Melville set out to justify the ways of God to man" ("Discussion" 205). Summarizing their discontent with this reading, Forster says that any account of *Billy Budd* that "justifies" Vere's actions is "much too smug an account of it" ("Discussion" 205). Their own position on the novella, Crozier says, resembles that of William Plomer (poet, novelist, librettist, and close friend of Britten's), who in 1946 had published an edition of *Billy Budd* in England.[39] Crozier quotes Plomer's

[38] By this time Forster had, in fact, already written explicitly about homosexuality his novel *Maurice* (written between 1913 and 1914; published in 1971)—a text that he would not allow to appear in print until after his death.

[39] Plomer's edition did not make significant changes to Weaver's 1924 and 1928 versions, but it is important to *Billy Budd*'s textual history because it was the first publication of the text as a separate volume. Britten and the librettist relied on it as they worked on the opera, and they even invited Plomer to help them with the

claim that that *Billy Budd* "was Melville's final protest against the nature of things" (Plomer 8; quoted in "Discussion" 205). None of them explains precisely what this "protest" reading means. But the BBC interview does register their opposition to the overwhelming critical praise for Vere, and it reveals that they understood their opera as working against the "testament of acceptance" consensus.

Despite their discontent with the critics who "justify" Vere's actions against Billy, Britten, Forster, and Crozier are not wholly unsympathetic to Vere as a character, and they seem to share Matthiessen, Chase, and Arvin's interest in him as a conflicted intellectual. In the BBC interview Britten says that "it was the quality of conflict in Vere's mind [. . .] which attracted me" to *Billy Budd* ("Discussion" 207). Stressing this intellectual conflict was apparently one of the major goals of the opera: "we surely humanized him," Crozier says of Vere, "and made him much more aware of the human values that were involved" ("Discussion" 206). They wanted their story to pivot on a thoughtful man "who finally had to stick by his code but [. . .] feels that in the final resort he must have been wrong to do so" ("Discussion" 207). Vere's conflicted mind drew Forster, Britten, and Crozier to Melville's story, and their revisions to it were meant to call attention to his mental turmoil and exacerbate his

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libretto. Crozier writes that when he first joined Forster and Britten to work on the opera, "they handed me a small black-jacketed volume—Plomer's 1946 edition of *Billy Budd*—and left me alone with it" (quoted in Reed 47).

consciousness of guilt. Martin, the only Melvillean who has written seriously about the opera, aptly suggests that Britten and the librettists want to portray Vere as a "tormented intellectual" ("Saving Vere" 55).

The most significant revision the opera makes is the addition of a prologue and epilogue in which an elderly Vere reflects on Billy's story; in the novella, Vere dies shortly after Billy's execution. This revision more than any other intensifies what we might call Vere's Forsterian dilemma. As Brett writes, "The Prelude-Epilogue frame [. . .] places the dramatic emphasis firmly on his moral choice and predicament, which is precisely that of choosing between loyalty to a fellow man and the authority of the state" (180).

The frame provides the "final resort" in which the tormented intellectual appears manifestly conscious of his wrongdoing. In the prologue he repeats, "What have I done? What have I done?" over a distressing accompaniment of strained, high-pitched strings and militaristic drums and trumpets (Britten 7). Vere asks, "Who has blessed me? Who has saved me?" and the story of the Handsome Sailor begins as a flashback (Britten 7). His words suggest that he looks back to Billy for consolation, but his tense voice and the dissonant orchestral background give the impression of a deeply disturbed man fingering an old wound.

In the epilogue, Vere declares his salvation and peace of mind as he thinks of Billy. "He has blessed me and saved me. [. . .] I am an old man now and my mind can go back in peace" (Britten 64). Martin takes this proclamation at face value and

argues that the opera's extension of Vere's life into "a dignified old age" provides him with an "assurance of eternal peace and content" ("Saving" 51). Martin goes on to denounce the opera, arguing that it manipulates *Billy Budd* into an apology for Vere's repression. "By allowing Vere to live," Martin writes, "the librettist inevitably made Vere a hero" ("Saving" 51). But his analysis of this revision ignores the tone of Vere's voice and the accompanying music, elements of the opera that lead Britten scholars to doubt Vere's words of self-assurance.

Brett notes that Claggart's martial musical motif accompanies Vere in the epilogue, and that his "confidence in his salvation is undermined by the throbbing pulse of the militaristic music" (113). Arnold Whitall argues that the music over which Vere assures himself restores the "dissonance that set the entire opera in motion" and renders his claims of peace "distinctly hollow" (167). The recurrence of the prologue's strain and dissonance, writes Whitall, "reinforce[s] the impression of Vere [. . .] as unable to die and forced to relive the experiences he recounts in a hellish kind of endless present" (168). In other words, the parallels between the prologue and epilogue suggest that Vere is locked into a cycle of grasping at salvation and sinking back into despair. As he returns again and again to Billy's execution, the opera's Vere vividly animates the agony of Chase's sense that the Handsome Sailor must be killed *continuously*.

Many of the opera's first reviewers shared these contemporary critics' sense that Britten and the librettists portrayed Vere as less than honorable and virtuous.

Some of the reviewers even seemed to notice the disparity between the opera and the critics' versions of Vere. As though expecting Vere to be better than he acts in the opera, one reviewer writes, "We find it hard to recognize in Vere the idolized leader, the man of action" (quoted in *Letters from a Life* 687). In the same spirit, another review says that "the much hero-worshiped and nice-minded arbiter" turns out to appear "rather as a sanctimonious, not to say priggish, character" (quoted in *Letters from a Life* 693). This last review may refer to Freeman's description of Vere as an "understanding arbiter," and it seems to allude to the all-but-ubiquitous academic lionization of Vere in the 1940s and early 50s. According to these reviewers, the opera replaced this fair-minded, heroic Vere with a morally weak and self-righteous man.

The opera's critical interrogation of Vere in many ways laid the foundation for the seminal anti-homophobic *Billy Budd* readings of the mid to late 1980's. Accenting Vere's suppression of the eroticized "rights of man," the opera heightens what Eve Sedgwick calls the "double entendre in this book [Melville's *Billy Budd*] between the mutiny question and the homosexuality question" (Sedgwick 103). Britten and Forster's rendering of Vere also anticipates Martin's claim that *Billy Budd* demonstrates "that the state, in its benign form of justice (Vere) or its malign form of police power (Claggart), could only perceive [same-sex] love as a threatening force" that must be repressed (*Hero* 124). Sedgwick and Martin both present Vere as a fundamentally vicious representative of state repression, and the opera's placement of

Claggart's words in Vere's mouth effects an analogous rendering of Vere as an instrument of suppression and violence.

Yet Britten, Forster, and Crozier—like Matthiessen, Arvin, and Chase—were ultimately more sympathetic to Vere than these more recent critics. They seem invested less in denouncing Vere than in exploring the weakness of his conviction, his enduring self-torment, and the possibility that he could and should have done otherwise. The issues stressed by the opera—love and desire between men, homosexual repression, state loyalty, and the possibility of Vere's redemption after Billy's execution—reveal its deep sympathy with the concerns of the postwar Americanists. Indeed, the opera retrofits *Billy Budd* to address these critics' interests even more directly than Melville's story. But as it does so, the opera also exacerbates Vere's unending personal agony and explores the anti-democratic repercussions of his actions, and it suggests that these troubling consequences are also in store for those who valorize him.

In the postwar moment, Vere thus came to represent a way of living in accord with a masculinist, homophobic society, and, at the same time, the tortuous self-disciplining and the punitive violence that accompany that very way of living. From inside the burgeoning discipline of American literary criticism—an institution which, as Arvin's career shows, was unambiguously hostile to open homosexuals as late as 1960—*Billy Budd* effected uniquely explicit reflections on the academic critic's

subjection to a powerful institutional entanglement of professional and sexual discipline. Matthiessen, Chase, and Arvin's readings of *Billy Budd* reveal that these critics were not only subject to such disciplinarity (as Grossman, Fuller, Martin, and others have shown), but that they were, much like Vere, reflective about their complicity in it and conscientious of their complicity's costs. Britten and Forster were inspired by the intimate questions that critics brought to Vere's story but troubled by their conclusions. Perhaps due to their distance from professional academic criticism, Britten, Forster, and Crozier more fully explore the continuous personal torment and anti-democratic ramifications of Vere's execution of Billy.

To conclude, I want to return to one the central arguments of this dissertation: that attending to the postwar reception of Melville unsettles what Jennifer Fleissner has called "a certain narrative of progress conjoining 'old' and 'new' American Literary Studies" ("After" 186). Part of what this "self-congratulatory narrative" has produced is an account of postwar Americanists as wholly committed to furthering the purposes of the Cold-War state and as perpetuating the hegemony of heteronormative masculinism (Fleissner, "After" 174). Yet I have shown that during this moment, *Billy Budd* elicited a remarkably explicit conversation about the emotional torment of such masculinism and about the state violence mandated by heteronormative professional and legal protocols. In this sense, the work of the postwar Americanists I've discussed anticipates the concerns of Queer Theory.

But Matthiessen, Arvin and Chase certainly did not articulate an anti-homophobic project like Sedgwick's, as their valorizing Vere's repression makes clear. Forster and Britten's opera was similarly non-combative: rather than denouncing Vere's actions, it dramatized his suffering and implied the anti-democratic repercussions of Billy's execution through narrative and musical accompaniment. These complex renderings of *Billy Budd* represent a mode of ideological engagement other than critique—a mode that explores the ramifications of the sexually repressive state without condemning it. We cannot overlook the fact that Matthiessen, Arvin, and Chase praised personal and political repression by embracing Vere, and I think Castiglia and Fleissner's avoidance of their tortured readings of *Billy Budd* is a weakness of their "reparative" approach to critical history. Rather than celebrating or condemning the postwar Americanists, I want to suggest that we follow Britten and Forster in recognizing that the questions about sexuality, disciplinarity, and violence that critics like Chase brought to *Billy Budd* made this text available for the more overtly anti-homophobic work of the opera, and for critics like Martin and Sedgwick. The postwar renderings of *Billy Budd* that I've discussed certainly bear witness to our field's history of homophobic masculinism. But they also elucidate that masculinism's affective damage to those who uphold it, and they expose the violent reciprocity of repressing homosexuality and repressing "the rights of man."

Chapter 3

C.L.R. James's "active, integrated humanism":

Moby-Dick and mid-century intellectual life

The divorce between criticism and life haunted me. Over the years I have bridged the gap. Melville and my audience did that for me.

- James to Jay Leyda, 1953

In 1938, Cyril Lionel Robert James came to the U.S. at the behest of Leon Trotsky with the mission of stirring the revolutionary potential of working class immigrants and African Americans. Before coming to the U.S., James had moved to London from Trinidad (where he was born and raised) in 1932 to become a novelist, but soon got involved with the British Trotskyists and began writing books about third-world liberation and revolution, the most famous of which was his account of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938). In the U.S., James organized and reorganized a number of socialist activist groups and published several criticisms of both Stalin and Trotsky's versions of Marxism. He also toured the U.S. to foment and organize the anti-capitalist sentiments of autoworkers and sharecroppers and to lecture to these oppressed groups about Marx, Hegel, Whitman, and Melville.[40] After

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[40] For more on James's activist work during the 1940s and 50s, see Christopher Taylor's excellent article, "C.L.R. James and Southern Agrarian

almost fifteen years of this work, James, not surprisingly, was arrested in 1952, at the height of the Red Scare. He was imprisoned on Ellis Island—that symbolic icon of welcome to immigrants that during the Cold War had been converted into a detention center— and deported back to England less than year later. While on Ellis Island, James did not spend his remaining time in the U.S. trying to commutate with the oppressed workers with whom he had worked, as one might expect, but scrambling to write a book about Melville, which he titled *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1953). When he finished the book, he got a loan to self-publish it and mailed copies to every member of the U.S. Congress as well as several prominent literary critics.

James's perhaps surprising turn to Melville and Melville studies during his last months in the U.S. poses a difficult, but perhaps illuminating question: why would a radical Marxist activist spend his final months in the U.S. explicating a difficult novel and exchanging letters about it with academics? I say this question is difficult because it points to a theoretical conundrum at the heart of our field's history—namely, the relationship of the aesthetic, the imaginative, and the literary to the political, the economic, and the social. I say it is perhaps illuminating because James seeks to theorize and articulate a synthesis of these two often-opposed forces without

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Movements," Paul Buhle's biography of James (chapter 3, "American Bolshevik"), and Anthony Bogues's *Caliban's Freedom* (chapter 4, "The American Years").

reducing one to the other. For the answer to this question lies in James's strikingly optimistic, perhaps even quixotic, faith in the immense political power of what he called "a great work of imagination."

James's profound faith in the power of the literary manifests itself in the conclusion to *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, where James makes clear that the Melville book is part of his (failed) campaign for U.S. citizenship. James appears to have believed that he could use *Moby-Dick* to persuade cultural and state authorities that to deport him would be an anti-democratic act of injustice. He also seems to have believed that his knowledge of Melville would prove his loyalty to American values and demonstrate that his "desire to be a citizen is not a selfish nor a frivolous one," as a quotation featured on the first edition's back cover bluntly put it (*Mariners* 166).

But there is more to the story than James's strategic bid for U.S. citizenship. Indeed, James believed that literature and especially the institution of literary interpretation have a primary role to play in the empowerment of the oppressed.

My title alludes to James's name for his synthesis of the literary and political: "an active, integrated humanism" (*American* 276). James's humanism does not appeal to a universal community of "the human"; it involves no sense that every individual possesses a timeless "human nature," nor does it try to bring all peoples under the banner of the great family of "humanity." The letter from which I draw my epigraph vividly illustrates James's unique brand of "humanism." Leyda, compiler of the widely

cited *Melville Log* and recipient of an unsolicited copy of *Mariners*, wrote back to James to criticize *Mariners*, claiming that Melville "was interested mainly in the human condition and not in political prophesy or economic relations" ("Letters" 234). James's response is that any one who would divorce "the human condition" from the political and the economic "shows merely that they have a very superficial conception of politics and economics" ("Letters" 234). James does not mean that "the human condition" can be reduced to politics and economics. What he means is that a richer, truer conception of politics and economics involves thinking about emotion, personal relationships, imagination, and, therefore, "great works of imagination" (*Mariners* 115). According to James's "active, integrated humanism," literature and literary interpretation therefore play a crucial role in both political self-consciousness and political action.[41]

James's interest in the literary and the imaginative has been for the most part ignored or obscured by much of the most influential scholarship on his American writings. Many scholars who celebrate James's other, more straightforwardly Marxist work have denounced James's writing about Melville—the acceptance of a

[41] James never cites the rich tradition of Marxist humanism—perhaps for strategic reasons—but he clearly he draws heavily on theorists such as Georg Lukács. For a survey of Marxist Humanism, see Erich Fromm's volume, *Socialist Humanism: an International Symposium* (1966).

hegemonic canon, the trafficking in bourgeois humanistic values—as a betrayal of his radical political commitments. For Paul Buhle, *Mariners* is "the least representative of his major works" and his exchanges with the critics "more nearly approached an apologia for social life under capitalism than at any other time before or since" (106, 110). On the opposite side the spectrum, Donald Pease has argued on several occasions that James's reading of *Moby-Dick* introduces a seminal critique of Cold-War American nationalism—an ideological force that, according to Pease, dominated postwar Americanist discourse. Critics like Matthiessen and Chase, Pease argues, had converted *Moby-Dick* into "one of the planetary agents responsible for the global hegemonization of American values" ("Extraterritoriality" 205). But James's work "dismantles" this "Cold-War consensus" by reconfiguring *Moby-Dick* into a political critique on behalf of "the mariners, renegades, and castaways whose catastrophic deaths had been justified by the Americanist interpretive community" ("Extraterritoriality," 206).

This account is certainly more compelling than the Marxist critique of James, but Pease and his followers' effort to present James as a "pioneering practitioner of postnational American studies," to quote Christopher Gair, leads them to focus only on the political dimensions of James's work that resonate with contemporary

Americanists' critique of national boundaries and state power (Gair 1).[42] This emphasis on such issues—in both James's detractors and supporters—has led scholars either to dismiss or overlook James's repeated insistence on the inextricability of his politics from what he somewhat paradoxically called "strictly literary problems" ("Letters 237).

Pease's almost exclusive privileging of national identity and ideological critique in his writing about James bears witness to a longstanding tension between politics and "strictly literary problems." This tension is painfully obvious throughout the most influential critical work of the era, Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*. Indeed, in the introduction on "Method and Scope," Matthiessen explicitly opposes "the nature of literature" and the political. Here Matthiessen remarks that the moment of the American Renaissance could lend itself to "different kinds of investigation" (vii). You might consider "sources in our life," and write about its "economic, social, and religious" causes and ramifications (vii). Or you might be "primarily concerned with what these books were as works of art." Matthiessen, of course, sets out to conduct the latter inquiry ("concerning the function and nature of literature"), and he thus

[42] James's position on the efficacy of state politics vs. transnationalism is actually inconsistent and quite complicated. As Michelle Ann Stephens puts it, issues of nationality and transnationality present "a particularly thorny contradiction" throughout James's American writings (260).

renders his own explicitly anti-capitalist readings of *Moby-Dick* theoretically inexplicable.

In *Mariners* and his prison letters to the critics, James set himself the ambitious task of synthesizing these methods of inquiry that Matthiessen theoretically divorces but yet could not keep apart in his textual analysis. Drawing on a diverse array of sources—Marxist literary theory from Georg Lukács to Theodore Adorno, Hegel, Aristotle, even one of the founders of the New Criticism, I.A. Richards—James sought to theorize the inextricability of literature and social life. "Serious literary criticism," James repeatedly insists, "is serious social criticism" ("Letters" 233). As James reiterated on several occasions, it was vitally important for him to keep "the text"—*Moby-Dick*—from fading "into the background," from becoming "a mere expression of social and political ideas." Rather, he sought show how such ideas could be "embodied in" —without wholly consuming—imaginative representations of "human personalities"—their "emotion," their "clash of passions," and their "struggle for happiness" (*Mariners* 115). And yet James also fiercely opposed any effort to "isolate" such "literary" qualities from "the social movement" ("Preface" 258). His analysis rigorously links these qualities with what James saw as the most pressing political problems of the twentieth century—totalitarianism, the oppression of the "stateless" working class, and the intellectuals caught wavering between these two forces.

Perhaps James had in mind the near ubiquitous valorization of the intellectual Captain Vere and his "acceptance" of state power—and perhaps Chase's exhortation to "love Leviathan"—when he warned that postwar Americanists had not sufficiently set themselves against the totalitarian tendencies of Cold-War America. Using *Moby-Dick* as his primary source of evidence, James sought to persuade postwar Americanists to return to a leftist intellectual tradition of the field and to mobilize against the silencing and imprisoning of "alien subversives" like himself. This tradition runs from Van Wyck Brooks' call for a "usable past" that would mitigate America's "hectic individualism" and bring about "that sense of brotherhood in effort and in aspiration," through the work of Lewis Mumford, and culminates most visibly in F.O. Matthiessen's conflicted, but nonetheless patently political writing.[43]

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[43] In his splendid book on the American left in the first half of the twentieth century, *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning convincingly locates Brooks, Mumford, and Matthiessen's literary critical values within the political agenda of the Popular Front. Denning describes the Popular Front in a way that elucidates James's interest in this tradition: "the Popular Front became the attempt to unify [. . .] millions of industrial workers with the middle-classes—white-collar workers, professionals, and shopkeepers—in powerful urban alliances [. . .]. Under the sign of "the people," this Popular Front public culture sought to forge ethnic and racial alliances, mediating between Anglo-American culture, the culture of ethnic workers, and African

All of these critics had eloquently criticized capitalist individualism in their readings of *Moby-Dick*, and James extends and radicalizes their work by linking it to the American's totalitarian exploitation of its "stateless" immigrants. *Moby-Dick,* in James's hands, became a text that challenged postwar Americanists to oppose the injustices of postwar American immigration policy—specifically, The McCarran Act (also known as the Subversive Activities Control Act), the enforcement of which had landed James on Ellis Island.

"an active, integrated humanism"

In the years leading up to his arrest and deportation, James's political vision for the United States relied increasingly on "the role of human agency" in the organization and resistance of the masses—a shift that, according to Anthony Bogues, marked a significant "rupture" with more orthodox Marxists, spurring James's departure from Trotskyites and his criticisms of the American Communist Party (Bogues 100, 115, 129). Profoundly optimistic, James on several occasions expressed a belief in the emerging intellectual and humanistic aspirations of the American working class. If there ever had been "a passive subordinate mass," James believed that it was "undergoing liquidation in the very action of the mass which," in

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American culture, in part by reclaiming the figure of 'America' itself, imagining an Americanism that would provide a usable past for all workers" (446).

the moment of the early 1950s, was in the process of "creating a totally new society, *an active, integrated humanism*" (my emphasis; *American* 276).

Why call this emergent historical force "humanism," an undeniably bourgeois term that is laden with bland universalities, artistic hierarchies, and class elitism? Because, James argues, it is not merely that the masses are demanding social and economic justice; it is that "hundreds of millions of cheap books are now sold, and hundreds of thousands are reading Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Dreiser, taking them to the factory in the paper-bound editions" (*American* 272). Melville was especially important to James's own efforts to nurture this emergent humanism. James acknowledges that Melville has never drawn a popular audience, but, as he writes in the introduction to *Mariners,* "In the course of lecturing upon Melville in many parts of the United States, I have discovered that, once of the veil of bookishness is torn away, his characters are instantly recognizable"—recognizable not only to intellectuals, but to the sharecroppers and autoworkers whom James spent the majority of his time in the U.S. working with (*Mariners* 3). The emerging "active, integrated" humanism of these oppressed peoples, James believed, created a new role for intellectuals, a role that demands their "integration" with the masses. In the case of literary intellectuals, whom James seems particularly concerned with in the early 50s, the work becomes doing what James claims to do in his lectures on Melville:

making characters "recognizable," making them speak to the emotional, political, and economic conditions of the present.[44]

James first began developing his humanistic departures from conventional Marxist theory based on his experiences working with African Americans throughout the forties.[45] James believed that both the American Communist Party and Trotskyites had made the mistake of treating African Americans as a distinct nationality seeking national self-determination. In James's notes from his 1938 conversations with Trotsky on "the Negro question," it becomes clear that James

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[44] James's idea of the integration of intellectuals and mass movements has deep resonances with Antonio Gramsci's writing about "the organic intellectual." Gramsci famously compared the organic intellectual to the "traditional" intellectual—writers, artists, and philosophers whose intellectual work was detached from any specific social group or institution. The organic intellectual, by contrast, is "an active participant in practical life," "the thinking and organizing element of a particular social class" (Gramsci 10, 1). Despite these resonances, it is highly unlikely that James had read Gramsci's work. Gramsci composed the documents that make up *The Prison Notebooks* between 1929 and 1935, but they were not published until 1948, and they were not translated into English (from the original Italian) until the 1970s.

[45] See Bogues's *Caliban's Freedom (*77-98) and McLemee's "The Enigma of Arrival."

believed this nationalism was imposed onto African Americans by the Party, and that it did not reflect the grass-roots needs and desires of the black community. "The basis of the organization must be the struggle for the day-to-day demands of the Negro," James writes; and "the Negroes [. . .] are and have been in every sense of the word, Americans" ("Documents" 70). The implication, James argues, is that Marxists must recognize that the "the Negro struggle" will not be for an independent nation, but will be "waged under the banner of democratic rights" ("Revolutionary" 183). "The Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle," James writes, has a vitality and validity of its own. " [. . .] We challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights" ("Revolutionary" 183). James's insistence on terms such as "the day-to-day demands of the Negro" and "the independent Negro struggle" represent early reflections of his conviction that radical movements must be based on the organically arising demands—the "human agency"-- of the oppressed, even when those demands conflict with revolutionary Marxism.

James's "reformist" as opposed to "revolutionary" (to borrow Bogue's terms) position on "the Negro question" echoes throughout his writing about culture and literature while he was in the U.S. James believed, probably rightly, that the vast majority of Americans, working class and otherwise, shared the black community's commitments to patriotism and democracy. In an essay titled "The Americanization of Bolshevism" (1944), he argued that Marxist movements in the U.S. must be

"rooted in the economic and social life, history, and tradition of the nation" ("Americanization" 283). Committed to the values of the people he was working with, James increasingly utilized a pro-American, pro-democracy liberal vocabulary, a trajectory that culminates in his unfinished (and posthumously published) *American Civilization* and his book about Melville, both of which, James believed, could appeal to a Cold-War, anti-Communist American "general public" (*American* 26).

James therefore eschews the language of revolt and revolution, opting instead to articulate his opposition to capitalism in the Tocquevillean terms of "free association," or by emphasizing the "comradeship and unity" among the interracial crew of the *Pequod* (*Mariners* 28). James's "reformist" political strategy becomes apparent in his reading of *Moby-Dick*: he enthusiastically praises the crew for prioritizing "their everyday doing of work" over revolting against Ahab (*Mariners* 28). "Melville took great pains to show that revolt was no answer to the questions he asked," and the same could be said of James's politics in *American Civilization* and *Mariners*. My point here is not that James was or wasn't theoretically committed to a working class revolution. James's position on this issue appears to have shifted throughout his life, as he adapted himself to different political circumstances.[46]

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[46] For instance, after James returned to Europe, he vehemently supported the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Bogues provides a compelling discussion of James's complex, shifting attitude on revolutionary politics (153-169). For information

Rather, my point is that his fundamental commitment to the "human agency" of the masses leads him to accept and appeal to the values of the people he viewed himself as working for in the U.S. These people, James believed, demanded rights and recognition through democracy in America, not through the revolutionary formation of a new state.[47]

In *American Civilization*, James presents antebellum abolitionists as modeling this service to the values and demands of the oppressed. James portrays the abolitionists as an educated, powerful organization that took up the cause of the oppressed and articulated their demands through powerful media channels. Figures like Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison, James believed, were the "highest peak reached by United States intellectuals" (*American* 92). According to James, these abolitionists exemplified the chief intellective virtue of service to the specific demands of a grass-roots political movement: they were "intellectuals whose intellectual, social, and political creativity was the expression of precise social forces"

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regarding James's involvement with the Hungarian Revolution, see Buhle's biography of James (*James* 121-136).

[47] According to Stephens, "James's ultimate insight on the Negro question was that the desire for a black nation within a nation, black self-determination, was itself not a move for segregation, independence, or autonomy, but rather a push for the Negro's full integration in the American state" (228).

(*American* 85). As a result of their "constant contact with the mass," James writes, "they were the means by which a direct social movement expressed itself, the movement of the slaves and free Negroes for freedom" (*American* 85). This idealization of the abolitionists, of course, overlooks Douglass's infamous critique of John Collins and Garrison for insisting that he merely "give us the facts [. . .] and we'll take care of the philosophy" (Douglass 367). Douglass's point here is that abolitionist leaders, in fact, did not fully submit themselves to the specific ideas and demands of African Americans—a point that Ellison reminds his readers of in *Invisible Man* by comparing the abolitionist movement to the oppressively controlling, top-down infrastructure of the Brotherhood. But James's goal here is not historical accuracy. It is to theorize a corrective intellectual identity using a well-known movement in American history. For James understood that this account of the abolitionists—distorted, or at least selective, as it may be— was an important model for intellectuals during the moment of the emerging "human agency" of the masses.

The duty of intellectuals in the postwar moment, James believed, is to nurture this emergent humanism and its attendant demands for social equality and economic justice and to articulate these demands in dominant media channels. Especially important to this emergent humanism is James's faith in the rising demand for literature and literary knowledge among the oppressed. And the emergent literary intellect of the masses, according to James, demands a new political role for the expert mediator of literature, the literary critic. Indeed, James explicitly draws out the

relationship between this budding "active, integrated humanism" and literature in an explicit challenge to his literary critical contemporaries:

> Modern criticism has to reckon with the fact that modern man, the ordinary everyday citizen, feels that he requires to know his past in order to understand his present. This knowledge he can only learn in art, and above all in literature. So that criticism today has a popular function to perform. ("Popular" 252).

Literature becomes a vitally important historical force: it is the special means by which "the ordinary, everyday citizen" can become reflective concerning her place in larger historical and political currents. Turning the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian revolution into a play, lecturing to autoworkers and sharecroppers on Melville, spending his final days in the U.S. struggling to finish and publish a book about *Moby-Dick* and "the world we live in"—all of these endeavors testify to James's own effort to realize this "popular function" of the literary. And his conviction about the purpose of modern criticism must have—at least in part—galvanized James's efforts to intervene in postwar Melville studies, a powerful emergent field that James perhaps believed could continue his literary-political project in the U.S. after his deportation.

"aesthetic foundations"

Urgent, rushed, and frantic as James's situation on Ellis Island must have been, his engagement with postwar Americans is nonetheless rhetorically poised and

theoretically sophisticated. Appealing to Aristotle, Hegel, and the values of New Criticism, James developed a complex theory of the relationship between literary text, "popular audience," and the mediating figure of the literary critic. Much of this theoretical work was done in the year or two just after he was deported from the U.S., but these concerns first appear in James's writing as he was working to engage the postwar literary academy. Before diving too deeply into his extended reading of *Moby-Dick*, I want to elaborate the theoretical apparatus—the "aesthetic foundation," as he called it—that informed James's interactions with postwar Americanists ("Letters" 231).

James cites Aristotle and Hegel as his primary theoretical influences on a number of occasions. He understands both of them as fundamentally committed to the social power of literature—the power to represent problems that interest and compel a specific community. "Modern critics" do not understand Aristotle, James writes, because "they do not root their criticism in the world in which they live" ("Preface" 256). James argues that Aristotle's emphasis on the power of a play to affect its audience synthesizes literary form and popular reception. This synthesis, he writes, is "the indispensible foundation of any serious reorganization of contemporary criticism" ("Preface"256). Aristotelian literary criticism, according to James, analyzes a text's power to reveal to its audience a "situation in which they feel themselves to be profoundly involved" ("Preface" 256). Literature that is "artistically superior," therefore, is literature that engages a community's most basic concerns,

literature that, to quote James, "makes the whole nation feel that it was involved" ("Preface" 256).

This conceptualization of "the whole nation" as the communal audience of the literary text is crucial to James's critical agenda, and it marks his close proximity to the national concerns of postwar Americanists. James believed that the primary means by which a literary text appeals to a "popular audience" is by representing "the history of a nation at a certain point in its development" ("Preface" 257). James's work in *Mariners* applies this version of Aristotelian literary criticism to Melville by asking his readers to recognize a "crisis of state" in *Moby-Dick*—a democratic crisis manifested in James's own imprisonment on Ellis Island.

Even more important than Aristotle to James's criticism is Hegel's idea of the work of art as the best encapsulation of a culture's present, past and future. Art criticism from a Hegelian perspective is thus of "central relevance for the analysis of society and culture," as it studies "the center of a society's philosophical and cultural self-reflection" (Fluck 158, 141). James treats Melville as what Hegel calls a "World Historical Individual"—a figure capable of, as Hegel says, seeing in "the very truth of their age and their world, the next genus, so to speak, which is already formed in the womb of time" (38-39). James thus emphasizes characters as embodiments of a moment in history, but also as anticipations of social and political movements to come.

James's sense of what counts as "great writing" is directly informed by his Hegelian understanding of the relationship between art and the succession of historical eras. "The very greatest of writers," James writes in reference to Melville,

> seem to be those who come at the climax of one age, but this is because the new age has grown up inside the old and they are watching both. [. . .] The greatness of a writer is revealed by the fact that peering and probing until he finds what he considers the fundamental types in his own period, he portrays what we in later years can see are the ancestors of what exists in our own world.[48] (*American* 76)

James utilizes this Hegelian literary aesthetics to construct a sort of grand narrative of the rise and demise of the character type that most concerned him—namely, "the isolated intellectual." Given birth through Hamlet's "free individualism" and his "polarization of action and thought," this "type," James believes, is sent to the grave in Melville's representation of the isolation, depression, and powerlessness of Ishmael and Pierre ("Letters" 233). As I'll show below, James argued that Melville's characters

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[48] James cites Hegel—a familiar philosopher for postwar Americanists— as the source of this idea, but it is fairly obvious that he is also drawing heavily on Lukács's work. Lukács argues that "classic" artworks are fundamentally "concerned with the creation of types," which embody "the lasting features in a people" and "endure over long periods" (Lukács 47).

embryonically anticipate the problems faced by American literary intellectuals in the 1950s.

The key concept that James draws from both Aristotle and Hegel is the idea that literature—when read or mediated correctly—has a unique power to make its readers conscious of their most pressing historical and political conditions, conditions that might otherwise remain unarticulated. James also elaborates this same idea through the work of the proto-New Critic I.A. Richards, a figure who even more than Aristotle or Hegel had made an immediate impact on the values of Americanists.[49] In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen had theorized the culturally

[49] For an excellent analysis of James's relationship with the New Criticism, see Pier Paolo Frassinelli's work. In analyzing James's writing about Shakespeare, Frassinelli argues that James's approach to literature represents "an alternative both to the misguided Communist prescription of 'art for the masses,' and what he perceived as the retreat into the clique or coterie of high modernism" (16). James rejected both what he regarded as the Communist Party's reduction of art to political propaganda and the political disengagement of New Criticism. The former's promotion of propaganda "on behalf of the proletarian class struggle," James writes, "is a way to produce party resolutions, not great literature"; and the latter's effort "to defend the work itself from all alien influences," he says, "isolate[s] it from the social movement and [. . .] destroy[s] it" ("Popular" 253, "Preface" 258).

enriching, communal effect of literature through Richards's work. As Matthiessen quotes, Richards wrote that literary art is the means by which "our will is collected, our powers unified," and by which "the infinitely divergent strayings of our being are brought into balance" (quoted on 645). James's own summary of what he regarded as Richards' most valuable idea actually appears to be based on the same passage quoted by Matthiessen. "Mr. I.A. Richards," James writes, "another critic who years ago discovered the popular audience, aimed to emancipate it [the popular audience], not by the abolition of private property, but by using literature as a means of bringing some order and balance into the chaos of its impulses" ("Preface" 258). This vision of literary art as ordering and making articulate the radical humanism of the masses, a humanism that he firmly believed would lead to their social and political empowerment, is obviously different from Richards' and Matthiessen's Arnoldian idea of literature as providing structure and coherence to a secularizing Western culture. Nonetheless, James's radical elaboration—or appropriation, one might even say—of (Matthiessen's) Richards allows him to engage the values of the field and to voice his own theory of the political power of literature in the language of an authoritative critic who played a formative role in postwar American literary studies.

James brings all this theorizing to bear on the field of American literary criticism most directly in his long, articulate, and confrontational letter to Jay Leyda, which circulated among numerous other critics. This important document in the history of American criticism represents the most comprehensive statement on

literary critical methodology that James produced while in the United States. From its very first paragraph, it reveals the rhetorical importance of James's rigorously theorized "aesthetic foundations." For James begins the letter by repudiating Leyda's suggestion that his book about Melville has more "drive" than "logic" ("Letters" 231). Citing his basis in Aristotle, Hegel, and Richards, James argues that Leyda is wrong to believe that *Mariners*' arguments were based on "my 'feelings' because of my imprisonment" rather than on a methodologically sound approach to the literary text. "I insist that you must have a basis for criticism," James says; "I am perfectly aware of the aesthetic foundations on which *my* criticism is based" (original emphasis; "Letters" 231).[50]

[50] In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said articulates a broader colonial context into which Leyda's criticism of James should be placed. Said claims that there is a tendency among Western academics to "impugn" third-world intellectuals as merely "wailing for sympathy"—"to dismiss them as the emotional and subjective *cris de coeur* of strenuous activists and partisan politicians" (258). This, Said argues, is why it is so important for intellectuals like James to "set themselves the critical task of dealing frontally with the metropolitan culture, using the techniques, discourses, and weapons of scholarship and criticism" (241). Said cites James's rigorous historical work in *The Black Jacobins* as an example of such work. I would argue that the theoretical rigor of

"The divorce between criticism and life haunted me," James goes on to say. He then claims that his own approach to Melville "has bridged the gap" ("Letters" 231). "Rooted in Aristotle and Hegel," James claims, his methodology "illuminate[s] the text" by revealing its entanglements with the political problems of the past, present, and future. Throughout the letter, James insists on the importance of theoretically synthesizing politics and literature. This synthetic work, he repeats, does not take the critic away from "the text itself." Indeed, his methodology, he writes, represents "a social criticism which will illuminate the text" and that enables him "to pose and solve literary problems" ("Letters" 234, 237). Several times during the letter James repeats his most important theoretical conclusion: "Social criticism and literary criticism are indistinguishable" ("Letters" 233).

While elaborating this point to Leyda, James lays out his Hegelian "theory of characters in great fiction" ("Letters" 231). He argues that "each character is rooted in his own age," but also that "changes and social developments are reflected in them" ("Letters" 231-32). The implication is that to understand these "characters in great fiction," the critic must not only understand their engagement with the author's "own age," but also analyze their reflection of political issues of the past and future. The social and political resonance of these characters is both "horizontal, covering

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Mariners and James's letter to Leyda are also efforts to accomplish this "critical task" of the minority intellectual.

the known world" of the author, and "vertical, bringing as they do imaginative conceptions of history which they boldly place in the contemporary world" ("Letter" 232). James thus synthesizes a formal textual element—character—with the authors' synchronic entanglement in their own moment in history, and their (conscious or unconscious) diachronic engagement with deep transhistorical trends that run through their work and into "the contemporary world." A literary text, its world, and the world of the contemporary reader are fully enmeshed in aesthetic experience. And the task of the critic, James believed, is at once to describe a text's relationship with its own moment and to articulate its relevance to social and political problems of the critic's present.

Not surprisingly, the political issue that James most explicitly addresses is the dilemma of "the intellectual, the individualist"—an issue that he believes is "fundamental to modern criticism" ("Letters" 233). Throughout the letter to Leyda, James exemplifies his synthesis of social and literary criticism by applying his Hegelian "theory of character" to Ishmael, "the isolated intellectual." James briefly articulates his arguments about Ahab and the crew as respectively embodying "the totalitarian type" and the modern transnational working class, but he elaborates at length on Ishmael's "vertical" continuities with and challenges to the individualist intellectualism of Melville's past and future. "The intellectual of free speculation," James explains to Leyda, first emerges with clear distinction in Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* a play committed to "tracing the intellectual type" and defining its strengths and

weaknesses ("Letters" 233). James argues that *Hamlet* marks the "beginning of a great historical career" for "the modern intellectual," and that "his greatest period is the 17th and eighteenth century" (sic), meaning that during this time "the intellectual of free speculation" was important to the development of democratic human rights ("Letters" 233).

But by the nineteenth century, James argues, "his isolation begins," and "Melville completes his collapse" ("Letters" 233). In characters such as Ishmael, Pierre, and the narrator of "Bartleby," "Melville chronicled their decline": "He sent them to the bottom of the sea" ("Letters" 233). And it is precisely this dimension of Melville's work that makes it so relevant to the practice of literary criticism in the middle of the twentieth century. The "decline" of "the intellectual of free individual speculation," according to James, "is in every line of *Moby-Dick*," and for this reason "it belongs to the twentieth century" ("Letters" 233). James understands Melville's writing as calling for the integration of the intellectual with the working class—as anticipating James's own demand that literary intellectuals align themselves with the masses: "Melville heralded the age when once more the individual had to be integrated with society" ("Letters" 235).

Near the end of the letter, James directly applies this demise of the isolated intellectual to literary criticism in the twentieth century. Writing as a critic addressing an audience of critics, James argues that

> *We* have to begin with the social ideas. [. . .] This is the mental framework of our age. The critic who ignores it will find himself [. . .] out of contact with anything or anybody, other than his own coterie. I cannot go into it here except to repeat (with Melville) that the age of individualism is over. The intellectual must once more be incorporated with the universal. It is a profound subject *today*. (emphasis original; "Letters" 236).

Here James clearly demonstrates his synthesis of social and literary criticism. He identifies the character type of the present that he sets out to challenge in century-old writings by Melville. He then performs a reading of the canonical author's texts that places this figure within a narrative of historical demise—a narrative that he presents as a warning to his audience of literary intellectuals.

James does not use the prominent New Critical image of "organicism" in his literary writings, but this idea nicely ties together the two core, seemingly conflicting, threads of James's literary critical methodology: first, that the critic should primarily aim to "illuminate the text," and take care not to reduce it to a social or economic formula; and second, that the critic should read the literary text as encapsulating powerful historical forces ("germs," in the Hegelian lexicon) that grow into social and political prominence. The concept of organicism, in other words, unifies the Hegelian historiography that informs James's claim that Melville can "prophesy" *future* states of historical being and the theory of textual unity that informs his claim that the demise

of the isolated intellectual "is in every line of *Moby-Dick*." James thus draws on while at the same time radically transforming the New Critical idea of the text as an organic whole. What the organic wholeness of the literary text really means, James suggests, is that text, context, and readers; aesthetics, economics, and politics; and even past, present, and future—all of these are living components of a single organism.

"the story of Herman Melville and the world we live in"

The depth of James's commitment to the political importance of literary art is nowhere better demonstrated than in his frantic effort to write, publish, and circulate *Mariners* before being deported. This unique text "organically" brings together a sustained reading of *Moby-Dick* with a case for the relevance of literature to political life, an explicit call for its readers to oppose Cold-War immigration policy, and an eloquent plea for U.S. citizenship. "What Melville did," James explains, "was to place within the covers of his book a presentation of a whole civilization so that any ordinary human being today can read it in a few days and grasp the essentials" (*Mariners* 115). Here James again betrays his profound optimism in the humanistic capacity and interest of the masses. But more importantly, he expresses his belief that Melville's *corpus*, when read properly, encapsulates "the whole history of the past, the significant experience of the world around him, and a clear vision of the future" (*Mariners* 115). For James's analysis in *Mariners*, this vision of the future is paramount. *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, in James's rendering, reveal the power dynamics between the

three most politically important "types" of the mid-twentieth century: the totalitarian, the transnational or "stateless" worker, and the intellectual. Throughout *Mariners*, James articulates these three types through readings of Melville to make two primary points: that democracy in America is fundamentally broken due to the plight of immigrants and workers, and that intellectuals, especially literary critics, must be more active on behalf of the oppressed in order to fulfill their own claims to practice a democratic criticism.

James' sense of the present moment of the 1950s, which is the future he reads Melville as envisioning, echoes Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism and "the problem of stateless people" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)—a text that shares James' concern with the history of totalitarianism in the West. In a chapter called "The Decline of the Nation-state and the End of the Rights of Man"—a title that certainly would have appealed to James's interests in the early 50s—Arendt argues that there is a direct relationship between the emergence of totalitarianism in Europe and the increasing number of "stateless peoples"—groups of people who are inside a state's boundary, and thus subject to its laws and customs, but are not full citizens and not recognized as part of the national community. Arendt presents overwhelming historical evidence, and her argument is too complex for me to do justice to it here. For the purpose of understanding James's work on Melville, however, Arendt's most important point is that the nation-state's denial of human rights to stateless peoples represents a fracture in the foundation of democracy. It is a denial of the inherent

equality of humans and the universality of human rights. "The problem of stateless peoples," she argues, is that they reveal that "humans," in the modern world, are not inherently equal and not universally found deserving of human rights:

> The conception of human rights, based on the assumed existence of human beings as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human. The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human. (299)

Once the "principle of equality before the law has broken down," she continues, the formerly democratic nation "dissolves into an anarchic mass of over-and-under privileged individuals" (290). Totalitarianism—the "total power" of a government over its people—thus emerges in the wake of the state's denial of human rights to the stateless. When James applies this logic to the U.S. as he synthesizes his own treatment on Ellis Island with the experience of the *Pequod*'s crew, *Mariners* becomes a prophetic Jeremiad, calling America back to its democratic foundations of universal human equality, lest it go the way of German and Russian totalitarianism.

Donald Pease's groundbreaking work on *Mariners* has compellingly articulated James's intervention in postwar politics. He argues that James uses this authority to attack the McCarran Act as a betrayal of American democratic values—as "law-breaking rather than norm-preserving" ("Emergence of Transnational" 72). By

correlating the oppression of alien subversives under the McCarran Act "with the traumatic events that the *Pequod*'s crew had been compelled to undergo under the governance of Ahab," Pease claims that James symbolically transformed Ellis Island, a place that "had been consecrated in the American imagination as the port of entry through which immigrants, exiles, and political refugees passed on their way to becoming natural citizens," into "a scene of social death"—"a historical correlative for the catastrophic shipwreck at the conclusion to Melville's novel" ("The Narrative Testimony" 34-35).

Pease's argument here illuminates James's quick—at times abrupt—oscillations between his close-readings of Melville's work and his condemnations of Cold-War American politics. On several occasions, James pauses in his close readings to argue that the U.S. government's denial of democratic rights to minorities, immigrants, and workers represents a hypocritical departure from the principles of human equality upon which the country is ostensibly founded. "This," James writes, referring the McCarran Act, "is not what had made the U.S." (*Mariners* 160). For this Act is premised upon a fundamentally anti-democratic "racial doctrine," which holds that "the national race, the national stock, and national blood is superior to all other national races, national stocks, and national bloods" (*Mariners* 13). The act is thus "permeated with the doctrine of racial superiority" (*Mariners* 13). James concludes that "the United States Department of Immigration is today in its policy-making echelons riddled with national arrogance": "for them an alien is not a human being"

(*Mariners* 140). Like Arendt, James argues that it is precisely in this denial of human rights to one who is an "alien"—not of "the national stock"—that the United States betrays its democratic principles and approaches totalitarianism. This critique of democracy in America seamlessly interweaves with James's representation of Ahab and the *Pequod*'s crew of nation-less "*isolatoes*." As "the most representative writer of modern civilization," Melville prophesied the totalitarian denial of human rights to the stateless through his depiction of Ahab's exploitation of his transnational crew of "mariners, renegades, and castaways" (123).

But, as I said earlier, Pease's exclusively political analysis of *Mariners* does not account for this complex text's reliance on what James calls "aesthetic foundations." Despite the overt political radicalism inherent to James's understanding of Melville, he repeatedly insists that the superior aesthetic quality of *Moby-Dick* is integral to its relevance to the totalitarian oppression of the stateless and the failures of intellectuals in the twentieth century. *Moby-Dick* does not merely describe how "men would sooner or later behave." "Being a creative artist," James writes, Melville "had seen in terms of human personality and human relations" (*Mariners* 13). It is this "human" quality that allows Melville to reveal "the intimate, the close, the logical relation of madness, to what the world has hitherto accepted as sane, reasonable, the values by which all good men have lived" (*Mariners* 13). The aesthetic quality of the text is thus what allows *Moby-Dick* to make the subtle, more meaningful political point that totalitarianism grows within ordinary humans who subscribe to accepted values.

James explicitly acknowledges the "danger" of his own highly politicized hermeneutics: he worries that "the book, as a work of art, fades into the background, and it becomes a mere expression of social and political ideas" (*Mariners* 115). Reducing a literary text to its political position is "fatal because the social and political ideas in a great work of imagination are embodied in human personalities, in the way they are presented, in the clash of passions, the struggle for happiness, the avoidance of misery" (*Mariners* 115). Without such imaginative and humanistic qualities, a literary text remains lodged in its own moment in history—perhaps a compelling critique of political exploitation, but unable to speak beyond its moment in time. James (unconvincingly to most modern readers, including this one) attacks *Benito Cereno* as precisely such a text. It rightly exposed the "blindness and stupidity" of "an advanced civilization," so it articulates a productive political critique. But, James argues, ultimately it is "a propaganda story, [. . .] written to prove a particular point" (*Mariners* 122-123). Since the story's politics are less humanistic, it is less applicable to the twentieth century than an aesthetically superior text like *Moby-Dick*. Artistic or imaginative quality and transhistorical political relevance are thus fully entangled and mutually complementary elements of the aesthetic theory that informs James's analysis in *Mariners*.

In *American Civilization,* letters to critics, and *Mariners,* James links the literary past with the political present through a subtle redefinition of "symbolism"—a term that had become all but ubiquitous among Americanists who wished to distance

themselves from what they perceived as the overly politicized criticism of the thirties and early forties. Charles Feidelson Jr.'s book *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953) exemplifies this trend of postwar criticism, as it argues that focusing on "symbolism" will allow Americanists to productively move beyond "the sociological and political bent of studies in American literature" (3). Feidelson specifically attacks Matthiessen's focus on "the possibilities of democracy" to argue that the real issue in the works of Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, and Melville is "the possibilities of symbolism" (4). The multivalence and "ambiguity" of the symbol, versus "the pat moral and simplified character" of allegory, according to Feidelson, represented "a new subtlety of achievement" in literary aesthetics in America (15). Chase also praised symbolism for its ability to explore "disagreement about truth," and, not unrelatedly, Chase also attacked Matthiessen for reading Melville as an advocate for "liberal progressivism" (*American Novel* 82, *Herman Melville* vii).

James echoes this privileging of symbolism over allegory (and repeats the term "symbol" and "symbolism" dozens of times), but to a very different purpose than Fiedelson and Chase. Allegory "concretizes and imprisons the universal," James writes, and Melville's use of symbolism "offers the widest variety of reference and interpretation" (*American* 70). But rather than depoliticizing the multivalence of the symbol, James deploys precisely this aspect of symbolism to explain how Melville can be read as portraying the political problems of the mid-twentieth century. Emphasizing what he calls "the political structure of his symbolic presentation,"

James, for example, argues that in Ahab's hunt for Moby-Dick, "the conquest of the air, mastery of atomic energy, all of these are symbolized" (*American* 70). The "variety of reference and interpretation" of the symbol enables Moby-Dick to collapse the distance between past and present, and, in the hands of a Jamesian critic, make a "popular audience" in the twentieth century conscious of their position in the political dynamics of history. The "political structure" of Melville's symbolism thus becomes the burden of the critic, who, in James' view, must use the multivalent power of Melville's symbols to articulate the problems of contemporary politics.

James begins his analysis "of the relation of the great American [Melville] to the present conditions in the country which produced him" by expanding and strengthening Mumford and Matthiessen's anti-individualist, anti-capitalist arguments about Ahab (*Mariners* 115). James's reading of Ahab links their critical exposition of Ahab's "self-enclosed individualism" to both American Cold-War immigration policy and global totalitarianism, and thus links the failures of democracy in America with Stalinism and Nazism. Mumford and Matthiessen both essentially argue that Melville, to quote Matthiessen, "created in Ahab's tragedy a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is a part" (*American Renaissance* 459). James affirms this leftist reading of Ahab in arguing that Ahab's pursuit of absolute individual freedom precludes the individual human rights of those around him. But James expands Ahab's symbolic resonance for the mid-twentieth century by linking

his monomaniacal self-interest to the absolute "management of men" and "management of things" that characterizes "the modern totalitarian type" (*Mariners* 15). James claims that "Melville really saw the executives, the managers, the administrators, the popular leaders, and their development into the totalitarian type," and that this prophetic vision inspired his characterization of Ahab (*Mariners* 15).

James describes Ahab's exploitation of the rights of others using the language of the "management" of men and things. He uses similar terms in his theoretical political writing to argue that the continuity between American Fordism, Stalinism, and Nazism is that all three utilize "the plant, the scientific apparatus, the method, the personnel of organization and supervision, [and] the social system which sets these up in opposition to the direct producer" ("The Class Struggle" 198). Ahab's symbolic relevance to the twentieth century, in James's account, reveals the totalitarian continuities between industrial capitalism, American immigration policy, Stalinism, and Nazism. All of these, like Ahab, deprive individuals of human rights on the basis of promoting the supposedly more important interests of the venture capitalist, the Communist party, or "the national stock."

The Cold-War exploitation of workers and immigrants, who in James's account are symbolically synthesized in the *Pequod*'s crew, forms the basis of James's American Jeremiad against the McCarran Act. For James, the "human dignity" and "comradeship" of the international crew represent the radical democratic potentialities of American democracy—"the universal republic of liberty and

fraternity" (28, 78 *Mariners*). As he draws out the democratic implications of the crew, James stresses Melville's description of them as an "Anacharsis Clootz deputation," a collective embodiment of the "Universal Republic" envisioned by Clootz. Matthiessen had pointed out Melville's allusion to Clootz, but he did not elaborate its political implications; he says only that the allusion to Clootz indicates Melville's view of humanity as the diverse passengers of "a ship on its passage out" (*American Renaissance* 410). But James deploys the allusion to Clootz to support his claim that Melville demands that his readers attend to the political implications of life aboard the *Pequod.* Recalling his former writing about the French Revolution, James writes that Clootz

> was a Prussian nobleman who embraced the French Revolution of 1789. Clootz's ideas went far beyond those of his fellow revolutionaries. He was known as the Orator of the Human Race, was an ardent advocate of the Universal Republic, and he called on the National Assembly to establish the brotherhood of all men. (*Mariners* 19)

By calling attention to Melville's alignment of the *Pequod*'s crew with the "representatives of all nationalities" gathered by Clootz, James demands that his readers be conscious of the parallels between Ahab's exploitation of the crew and the oppression of secondary and non-citizens—those considered "aliens" to "national stock"—in postwar America. The "citizens of the world" who are imprisoned with

him on Ellis Island represent a modern day "Anacharsis Clootz deputation," subjected to the "national arrogance" of the United States Department of Immigration, just as the *Pequod*'s crew is subjected to Ahab's exploitative self-interest. "The whole world is represented on Ellis Island," James writes, and his list of the nationalities represented there evokes a Clootzian deputation: "Germans, Italians, Latvians, Swedes, Filipinos, Malays, Chinese, Hindus, Pakistanis, West Indians, Englishmen, Australians, Danes, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Canadians, representatives of every Latin American country" (151). James's analogy between the transnational crew of the *Pequod* and the "citizens of the world" detained on Ellis Island allows him to portray *Moby-Dick* as a prophetic warning to postwar American intellectuals and political leaders: continue down the path of exploiting the stateless, and Ahabian totalitarianism and self-destruction is your destiny.

The dialectical relationship between those without full representation in the state and totalitarianism is obviously integral to both James's political theory and his understanding of Melville, but the most impassioned and forceful arguments in *Mariners* focus on the relationship between Ishmael, Pierre, and the "individualist intellectuals" in the twentieth century. James's reading of Ishmael and Pierre represents *Mariners'* most direct confrontation of postwar literary intellectuals.

Michelle Ann Stephens has argued that James's reading of Ishmael and the *Pequod*'s crew "envisioned new forms of social relations between the First World and Third World subject" (243). James, she writes, challenges postwar intellectuals "to

enter into hands-on working dialogue with colonial intellectuals of color" and to align themselves with the political empowerment of transnational workers (245-46). Stephens eloquently articulates James's challenge to postwar intellectuals, but she mistakenly argues that Ishmael represented a model intellectual, and that James identified Ishmael's relationship with the crew as "a new basis for community" (246). This optimistic reading of Ishmael and the crew ignores James's harsh criticisms of Ishmael and obscures his challenge to Ishmael's twentieth-century progeny. For James argues that the Ishmael "type" represents an "intellectual Ahab" (41). He acknowledges that Ishmael is hesitant about Ahab's coercive power over the crew, just as he acknowledges and praises the tradition of leftist activism among Americanists. But James claims that Ishmael ultimately "follows Ahab, as the guilt-ridden intellectual of today, often with the same terror, finds some refuge in the one-party totalitarian state" (41).

"It is the twentieth century, our own," James writes, "which has Ishmaels on every city block." James subtly links his idea of "the intellectual Ahab" with American intellectuals and educators, as he generalizes about the Ishmaels of the twentieth century: "he is a member of a distinguished American family, is well educated, and has been a teacher." In James's account, Ishmael anticipates two possible pitfalls for the modern intellectual: clinging to totalitarian powers, or, just as bad in James's view, romantically feeling "himself to be one of the 'people'" and "joining the working class movement" (37).

At first glance, it seems that "joining the working class movement" is precisely what James demands of intellectuals in his theoretical writings, *American Civilization,* and in his letters to literary critics. What James identifies in Ishmael and Pierre, however, is the narcissistic attempt of intellectuals to purge their depression through a shallow, appropriative identification with the oppressed. In a chapter of *Mariners* called "Neurosis and the Intellectuals," James argues that "Ishmael and Pierre are sick to the heart with the modern sickness"(114). Like "the intellectuals of our time," for both of them "life is [. . .] a wasteland of guilt and hopelessness" (114). In both characters, James writes, we see a typical trajectory of the modern intellectual in the United States: "a young American, rejecting the official world he has known, goes toward the meanest and lowest in the land" (97). Both, in other words, seek to end their depression and alienation by identifying with "the poor and humbled"—Ishmael with Queequeg and the crew, and Pierre with his disowned half-sister Isabelle, whose immigrant mother had an affair with Pierre's father (104). In both cases the intellectual's relationship with "the meanest and lowest in the land" is fundamentally selfish, and for that reason, James argues, it is inevitably manipulative, shallow, and short-lived. Ishmael and Pierre, in James's reading, model the ramifications of narcissistic attempts to identify with the oppressed. They also suggest a prophetic warning to the modern leftist intellectual: commit to serving the needs of the oppressed and not your own theoretical agenda, or end up either susceptible to totalitarianism, as Ishmael was, or drawn to suicide, as was Pierre.

Mariners models James's theoretical synthesis of literature and politics—the inextricability of literary and social criticism, as he puts it in his letter to Leyda. *Moby-Dick*, when read by James, becomes an eloquent explication of the political power dynamic between totalitarianism, the stateless working class, and intellectuals. It also becomes a powerful instrument for condemning the democratic failures of the United States in its exploitation of the transitional working class. But the most immediate message of *Mariners* comes in the final pages, where James directly challenges his audience of "intellectuals and liberals" to transcend any abstract, Ishmael-esque resistance to oppression and to actively oppose the totalitarian "national arrogance" of Cold-War U.S. immigration policy. He extols them to "respect all humans, citizens or aliens, who are proud of their country's traditions and ready to make great sacrifices to maintain them" (167). As a first step in this direction, he asks them to help him in his fight "to be a U.S. citizen" by donating money for his attorney fees and for the publication of *Mariners* and by writing politicians about his value as a critic and citizen (166-167). Only through their effort, James adds in the penultimate sentence of the book, can the institution of literary criticism "meet the perils of the future" by performing its two fundamentally inextricable purposes: "to advance both the understanding of literature and the cause of freedom" (*Mariners* 167).

The mere fact that James was so interested in the field of American literary studies and that he worked so hard to interact with it unsettles the familiar account (promulgated by Pease, Shumway, and others) of postwar American literary studies as monolithically pernicious and of James's work in *Mariners* as an absolute repudiation of its corruption. If the field of American literary studies had been absolutely hegemonic, it is hard to believe that it would have attracted James and compelled his sustained attention in his final months in the U.S. That James prioritized his dialogue with the Americanists suggests that this field was already doing important cultural work that complemented James's political project, and that he believed it perhaps could extend this project in his absence.

In the previous chapter, we witnessed Matthiessen, Arvin, Chase—whose work James knew well—using Melville's writing to negotiate and interrogate the highly politicized issue of sexuality, and to conceptualize "homosocialist" alternatives to capitalist individualism and postwar heteronormativity. Clearly such political uses of the literary resonate with James's "active, integrated humanism," but this is certainly not to say that James had no objections to the politics and reading practices of postwar Americanists. James does not mention the postwar consensus on the disciplined virtue of Captain Vere, but he was obviously concerned about American intellectuals' increasing "acceptance" of what he saw as the ascending totalitarianism of the U.S. government. James's point was not that postwar Americanists were

totalitarians or hegemonic nationalists. Rather, it is that a nationalistic totalitarianism and a burgeoning "humanistic" demand for social justice are very real, alive forces in America, and that intellectuals need to take a more actively oppositional stance on behalf of the latter. James believed that as powerful, institutionally sanctioned mediators of literary meaning, American literary critics were in a unique position to challenge the anti-democratic practices of Cold-War America. Given his profound faith in the political power of the literary, it is not surprising that James made this case to the Americanists by way of that powerful "work of imagination," *Moby-Dick*.

Chapter 4

Ralph Ellison's Melville Masks

Whatever else his works were 'about,' they also managed to be about democracy.

-Ellison on Melville, 1953

From the first page of *Invisible Man,* which opens with an epigraph from "Benito Cereno," Ellison overtly inscribes his abiding fascination with Herman Melville. Throughout both of his novels and in several essays and interviews, Ellison includes dozens of hardly less subtle allusions to *Moby-Dick*, "Benito Cereno," and *The Confidence-Man*. At least part of Ellison's motivation derives from the prestige that Melville had acquired by the time of Ellison's own emergence as a novelist in the early 1950s. During this moment, Ellison understood that allusions to and readings of Melville would garner a powerful audience and lend authority to his creative and critical output. In this sense, Ellison's use of Melville resembles how James wrote a book about *Moby-Dick* to capture the attention of Americanists and to perform his loyalty to American values.[51] As it did for James, the

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[51] John Wright notes that Ellison and James actually knew each other and exchanged ideas while living in New York in the 1940s. The subject of nineteenth-century American literature, Wright says, would have "provided the two of them with [a] point of common critical reference, Melville in particular." James's book about

hypercanonicity of Melville's work in the wake of the "Melville Revival" offered Ellison unique access to cultural power. [52] This access allowed Ellison to show that African Americans are integral to what he called "the tradition of American literature" and to carve out a space for himself within "that very powerful literary tradition," as Ellison put it in an essay not coincidentally titled "On Initiation Rites and Power" (525). But Melville was also integral to Ellison's intensive interrogations of precisely this sort of strategic power negotiation, particularly in the manuscripts of his unfinished second novel.

Melville's notable presence in the second novel project has gone unexamined—not surprisingly, since it is buried in only recently published manuscript pages—but Ellison's earlier allusions to white American writers

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Melville, Wright continues, "had grown out of public lectures and private musings that he had shared with Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison during the 1940s." More research needs to be done on the details of this fascinating relationship (163-164).

[52] I borrow the term "hypercanonical" from Jonathan Arac, who uses it to describe a text or author who "monopolize[s] curricular and critical attention" and becomes identified "not just with a nation, but with the *goodness* of the nation" (*Idol and Target* 133, 14).

have stirred a rich conversation about the racial politics of canonicity.[53] This conversation figures Ellison as a democratic "joker" who affirms the canon only to repudiate the racially exclusionary hermeneutic practices of postwar Americanists.[54] Alan Nadel, for example, presents Ellison as a "trickster critic" who deploys allusions to writers like Melville, Emerson, and Twain to "revise the interpretive assumptions that structured the canon" (62). These allusions, Nadel argues, are designed to appeal to the racial prejudices of postwar Americanists, but they also create a subversive racial "subtext" that

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[53] Thanks to the herculean efforts of Adam Bradley and John Callahan, a large portion of the second novel was published in 2010 as *Three Days Before the Shooting.* The Melville allusions that I refer to here—and discuss extensively below—were not included in *Juneteenth*, a much smaller sampling of the second novel that Callahan published in 1999.

[54] My quotations around "joker" allude to work by Ross Posnock, who elaborates and advocates for what he calls Ellison's politics of "the joker." This Ellisonian "joker," Posnock writes, "achieves identity through improvised pastiche" and "playful acts of assemblage." By assembling multiple identities and "insisting on the primacy of the performative as the unstable grounds of identity," Posnock believes that Ellison "liberates the cosmopolitan energies of democracy" ("Joking" 1,5,7; *Color* 206).

"critiques and alters the tradition in which they function" (147). Similarly, John Wright argues that Ellison's commitment to canonical white writers represents neither opportunism nor "simple accommodationism," but instead is the result of Ellison's "concept of cultural synthesis as a subversive strategy of empowerment" (22). Nadel and Wright build on Houston Baker's argument that Ellison donned a "Western critical mask," which allowed him to infuse white American literature "with the captivating sound of flattened thirds and sevenths"—to modulate the canonical standards into a dissonant, jazz-inflected key by emphasizing racial prejudice and slavery (199). What all these critics share is a sense that Ellison theorized and practiced a strategic public identity that empowered him to appropriate and "blacken" white American literature. For these critics, Ellison's canon-based criticism is the work of a pioneer theorist of the subversive, democratic power of strategic racial performativity.

This is by and large a compelling account of what Ellison was trying to do with Melville in *Invisible Man* and throughout his critical essays. Ellison repeatedly alludes to the racial masquerades of Babo and the confidence-man as he explores "invisibility" as an empowering strategy "to take advantage of the white man's psychological blind spot" (Ellison, *Essays* 344). In *Invisible Man*, Babo and the confidence man, both protean tricksters who manipulate stereotypical assumptions about blackness, become models for negotiating

and subverting the power dynamics of American racism. Ellison also wrote several essays about Melville, Twain and other white authors that praise and affirm the American canon, while at the same time eloquently criticizing the racial negligence of postwar Americanists. In so doing, they exemplify the practice of the "trickster critic," who, in Ellison's words, "simultaneously cooperates and resists, says yes and says no" ("Initiation" 496).

Yet this subtle simultaneity of acceptance and rejection was lost on the prominent literary critics and radical black intellectuals who were reading and reviewing Ellison's work in the 1960s and 70s. These groups repudiated or ignored the racial dimensions of Ellison's writing about Melville. Both understood him, the former with praise and the latter with condemnation, as an uncritical advocate of a white American canon—as cooperating and saying yes rather than resisting and saying no. During this same period, Ellison labored at his apparently unfinishable second novel, a text that in many ways resonates with Ellison's unfortunate public reception as it takes up problems of cultural and racial boundary-crossing, strategic performativity, and political misrecognition. I argue that these manuscripts gravely question the political efficacy of the "guerilla action," as Ellison once called it, of his earlier work ("The World," 169).

Indeed, the second novel—especially its plethora of Melville allusions—erodes any stable distinction between strategically subverting and

unintentionally strengthening a hegemonic discourse. The novel's protagonist, Bliss, attempts to practice a mode of ideological engagement that closely corresponds to Ellison's idea of "saying yes, saying no." A black church community raises Bliss, but he grows up to pass as white and eventually becomes a race-baiting U.S. senator who calls himself "Adam Sunraider." As Sunraider, Bliss self-consciously appeals to the racism of the American electorate during the 1950s to establish and maintain his power. All the while, he tells himself that he is working to subvert the racism of his constituents: "Extend their visions until they disgust themselves," he tells himself (*Three Days* 392). But no one else seems to get his joke. Sunraider is embraced by the racists he aims to undermine and hated and feared by the African Americans he aims to help, one of whom eventually guns him down on the Senate floor.

Despite the avowed commitment to racial equality that lies behind his racist performances as Sunraider, Bliss ultimately becomes indistinguishable from the racist discourse he desperately tries to subvert.[55] His too-subtle

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[55] The structure of my argument about Bliss is in part inspired by W.J.T. Mitchell's reading of Spike Lee's controversial film *Bamboozled*. This film follows a frustrated African American television writer who proposes a minstrel show to satirize the racism of American television viewers. When the minstrel show becomes

strategy of cultural critique betrays his own democratic intentions. As Ellison imagines the African Americans who are hurt and horrified by Bliss, this ostensibly democratic joker transforms from a subversively ironic Babo figure into to an exploitative, destructive, and delusional "mammy-made Ahab," as one character calls Bliss. The second novel project thus marks a stark departure from the protean politics of invisibility in *Invisible Man.*

This departure takes the shape of a deep skepticism toward the political hope in racial hybridity and performativity expressed by critics like Posnock, Nadel, Wright, and Baker. The momentous number of pages and drafts that Ellison devoted to Bliss shows that he remained deeply attached to and compelled by the democratic possibilities of the racial "joker." But the second novel also explores the darker possibilities of this alluring figure: the

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a hit, the writer abandons his original satirical intentions, outrages African Americans, and is eventually murdered by a black member of his own staff. As Mitchell compellingly paraphrases the film, "satire descends into tragedy" (229). As it does so, he argues, "the movie thoroughly deconstructs" the writer's "satirical alibi" because "it shows the satirist destroyed by the very weapons of stereotype and caricature that he has unleashed" (302). Bliss is not exactly a satirist, but he does unleash obscenely racist rhetoric with the intention of sabotaging that rhetoric's power, and like *Bamboozled*'s protagonist, he is destroyed by the very weapons he attempts to deploy.

possibility of failing to be understood, and of becoming just as deranged and devastating as Captain Ahab. Ellison's career-spanning relationship with Melville, I argue, betrays a messier, darker account of Ellison's complex relationship with the politics of "saying yes and saying no" than Ellisonians have yet provided. I want to suggest that the second novel reveals an Ellison who is more challenging and perhaps more valuable to contemporary Americanists, who, as one critic has aptly argued, tend to place "all hopes for cultural resistance" in "the idea of multiple or hybridized identities" (Fluck 78-79).

The Politics of Invisibility

Wright refers to Ellison's stylized intellectual positioning as a result of his "Melvillean ironic temper," and *Invisible Man* substantiates the accuracy of Wright's phrase with its many allusions to Melville's shrewdest tricksters—Babo and the confidence man (190).[56] Ellison uses Melville's tricksters to

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[56] Several critics have written about thematic parallels between Melville's work and *Invisible Man*, variously noting shared investments in "confusions of illusion and reality" (Omans), images of lightness and darkness (Schultz), literature and democracy (Gray), con games (Leblanc), and inter-textual allusiveness (Arac). But these comparative accounts leave one with the impression that *Invisible Man*'s parallels with

describe characters and images that embody the performativity of racial identity and exemplify the subversive power that such performativity can bring.[57] Learning from these figures, the narrator ultimately embraces his "invisibility," not only as a necessary condition of living in a culture so laden

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Melville's fiction are almost incidental. They do not explore the depth of Ellison's fascination with Melville and Melville scholarship. One exception to this comparative trend is Alan Nadel's insight that *Invisible Man* uses allusions to Melville to criticize the racism of postwar American literary studies, an insight that I discuss at length below.

[57] Matthiessen notoriously describes Babo and the mutinied African crew as symbols of "evil," and a decade later Arvin would echo this view and call Babo "a monster out of Gothic fiction at its worst" (Matthiessen 508; Arvin 240). Since the first biographies of Melville, scholars have read *The Confidence-Man* as evidence of Melville's descent into depression and bitterness. Arvin called it "nihilist, morally and metaphysically," and Chase agreed, writing that "the frightening thing about the confidence man is that he is not a man; the perpetually shifty mask never quickens into the features of a human being" (Arvin 251; Chase 188). Ellison's early embrace of these characters whom his contemporaries seemed to fear anticipates the work of contemporary scholars such as Geoffrey Sanborn and Jennifer Greiman, who celebrate Babo and the confidence-man as modeling strategic and theatrical identities which productively challenge racial essentialism.

with racist stereotypes that "people refuse to see me," but as an "advantageous" "political instrument" (*Invisible Man* 3, 491). Using this instrument, the narrator becomes what Hortense Spillers calls "a figure of subversion," who can "undermine, systematically, all vestiges of the established order that has driven him underground" (Spillers 80).

Invisible Man's epigraph borrows a line from *Benito Cereno* that calls attention to the figure of Babo and his haunting power over the white characters in the story: "'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?" The answer to the question, which Ellison elides in the epigraph, is "the negro," referring to Babo, who has concealed a slave revolt from Delano by wearing the mask of a humble, deferent, and docile servant of the supposed captain of the slave vessel, Benito Cereno. Babo surreptitiously controls Delano's every movement by studiously affirming his belief that "there is something in the negro which, in a particular way, fits him for avocations about one's person." (716). When Delano gets uneasy about the behavior of the other "slaves" or begins to worry that Cereno is acting suspiciously, Babo reassures Delano by tending to his "master":

> Sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing those and similar offices with that affectionate zeal [. . .] which has gained

> for the negro the repute of being the most pleasing body servant in the world. (680)

The climax of Babo's performance comes after another "slave" strikes a white sailor with impunity. Babo shrewdly responds to Delano's consternation by inviting him to watch Cereno be shaved. When Delano sees "the colored servant, napkin on arm, so debonair about his master, in a business so familiar as that of shaving, too, all his old weakness for negroes returned" (717).

Ellison links Bledsoe, the cynical president of his fictionalized Tuskegee College, to Babo through their shared capability to establish power over the white people around them by performing the humble offices of a bodily attendant. The narrator of *Invisible Man* recalls that Bledsoe "was the only one of us I knew—*except perhaps a barber* or a nursemaid—who could touch a white man with impunity" (112, my emphasis). Bledsoe makes a career out of performing a servile, humble identity for the college's white trustees, who share many of Delano's expectations for black identity. This paradoxical power becomes clear to the novel's narrator as he watches Bledsoe manipulate the trustees while they are on stage during a chapel service: "The honored guests moved silently upon the platform, herded to high carved chairs by Dr. Bledsoe with the decorum of a portly head waiter" (112). Rotund, humbly dressed, and smiling, Bledsoe directs the movement

of the trustees just as a shepherd herds a flock of sheep. From a "posture of humility and meekness," Bledsoe can "exercise a powerful magic" over the trustees in much the same way that Babo exercises power over Delano (112-113).

Invisible Man's two most explicit allusions to *The Confidence-Man* are figures that in some sense symbolize Bledsoe's Babo-esque identity: the "very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed" "Jolly Nigger Coin Bank" and the "confidencing son of a bitch," Bliss Proteus Rinehart (480). When the narrator discovers the bank while staying in Mary Rambo's boarding house, he is disgusted by it and furious that Mary would allow such an artifact of racism into her rooms. In an exchange of letters about *The Confidence-Man* with Albert Murray, Ellison reveals that "the bank image in *Invisible* was suggested by the figure of the Black Guinea. That son of a bitch with his mouth full of pennies" (79). Here Ellison cites a scene in Melville's novel in which the confidence man, calling himself "Der Black Guinea," appears as a "grotesque negro cripple" who begs for coins (Melville, *Confidence* 10). The Black Guinea "would pause, throwing back his head and opening his mouth [. . .]; when, making a space before him, people would have a bout at a sort of pitch penny game, the cripple's mouth being at once target and purse" (11). The coin bank found by *Invisible Man*'s narrator physically materializes the obscenely degrading stereotype performed by Melville's confidence man.

The narrator first notices the coin bank as other residents in the house pound the pipes in the rooms to protest Mary's frugal use of the heating furnace (312). Enraged by what he calls their "cottonpatch ways," the narrator protests their protest by smashing the iron bank against the pipes in his room. Eventually he shatters the bank only to discover that he cannot get rid of this image of blackness that he hates, even after he has destroyed it. The minstrel coin bank remains in the narrator's briefcase, and he eventually realizes that even within the Brotherhood—Ellison's allegorization of the American left, from abolitionism to the American Communist Party—he cannot escape the degrading stereotypes of blackness that it represents (312-325).

The narrator learns that he can ironically perform racist stereotypes to subvert their power only after he discovers Bliss Proteus Rinehart, who like Melville's confidence man tactically transforms his appearance to establish "confidence" with various audiences. In an interview a few years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison claims that Rinehart is a "descendent of Melville's 'Confidence Man'" because he "is living a very stylized life" and "can act out many roles" (*Conversations* 75-76). Rinehart is simultaneously a pimp, lover, gambler, numbers runner, and evangelical preacher at a storefront church. Rinehart opens the narrator's mind to the instability of the surfaces and depths of one's identity—between one's "rind and heart"

(*Invisible Man* 490). "What is real anyway?" Rinehart causes him to wonder. "He was a broad man, a *man of many parts* who got around. Rine the runner and Rine the Gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the reverend. [. . .] The world in which we live is without boundaries" (490, my emphasis).

After his initial enthusiasm, the narrator momentarily resists Rinehart's "multiple personalities" and repudiates the fluidity of his identity as a retreat into cynicism. But he returns to Rinehart's political "possibilities" in the Epilogue, and presents Rinehart's "many parts" as a "political instrument" for achieving democratic equality.[58] Invisible Man dismisses the stable, authentic personal identity that he has sought for most of the novel:

> I've come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein. Now I know that men are different and all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. (*Invisible Man* 567)

At this point, Rinehart's self-division–his "multiple personalities"–becomes an appealing model for political subjectivity: "whence all this passion toward

conformity?–diversity is the word. Let man keep his *many parts* and you'll have no tyrant states" (567, my emphasis). Rather than opposing "conformity" to an ostensibly Emersonian "self-reliant" individual, Ellison opposes it to "diversity"—not of the socio-political community, but of the self. The performance of "many parts" becomes an effective mode of political resistance for those who are rendered "invisible" by a society's prejudices: "The negro's masking," Ellison writes elsewhere, represents "a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity" ("Change" 109). By theatricalizing—"yessing"—a racist culture's assumptions and expectations, one practices what Ellison calls "a sort of jujitsu of the spirit," "a denial and rejection through agreement" ("Change" 110).

Invisible Man presents the strategic racialized performativity "suggested by" Babo and the confidence man as an effective means "to collaborate with [a racist society's] destruction of its own values"—to "agree 'em to death and destruction," as the narrator's grandfather puts it (*Conversations* 76, *Invisible Man* 16). Indeed, Melville's tricksters seem inextricable from Ellison's effort to theorize a democratic politics of "invisibility." Rinehart's "multiplicity in ceaseless motion," according to Kevil Bell, "embodies" this politics by "undermining every certitude, destabilizing every authority, *concealing* the "truth" of his character *by performing* its proliferation in public" (31, original emphasis). Bell—like Posnock and the others I cite in my introduction—

leaves his account of Ellison's "joking" at praising him as a pioneer theorist of the subversive trickster. But following Ellison's abiding relationship with Melville into the 1960s and 70s reveals the limitations and partiality of this optimistic version of Ellison's politics of invisibility. For Ellison's Melvillean critical mask and the tricksters of his second novel undermine the binaries that Bell describes between the truth of one's character and its performances, between destabilization and authority—binaries without which the subversive power of the trickster becomes practically indistinguishable from complicity with power.

Ellison's "Western Critical Mask"

Between the mid 1950s and the 70s, Ellison developed a highly intellectual and stylized academic identity that largely depended on his loyalty to and knowledge of Melville, Twain, and other white authors of the postwar American canon. In many ways Ellison's "Western Critical Mask" exemplifies *Invisible Man*'s paradoxical synthesis of collaboration with and destruction of racism. Ellison says yes to the white canon only to repudiate the racially negligent reading practices of postwar critics.

The link between Ellison's literary critical performances and "confidencing" becomes explicit in a letter to his close friend Albert Murray. Murray asked Ellison about his time at Princeton University in 1953, where

he was listening to talks by Edmund Wilson and lecturing on American literature to luminaries such as R.W.B Lewis, Alfred Kazin, R.P Blackmur, and Saul Bellow (Rampersad 268, 279). "They've got the old rabbit back in the patch, wearing a black robe and trying to outdo ole Barbee," Ellison writes in response, comparing himself to the trickster rabbit of black folklore and to Reverend Homer A. Barbee from *Invisible Man*, who theatrically recounts the founding mythic narrative of Bledsoe's college to elicit students' devotion to the school (*Trading Twelves* 39). Ellison signed the letter "Rhine," suggesting that the academic identity he performed at Princeton was in some sense inspired by the "confidencing son of a bitch."[59] Several times throughout his letters with Murray, Ellison refers to the intellectual setting of the university as "my old briar patch"—a setting, he writes, that demanded "briarpatch cunning" (131, 116.)

Ellison's arguments about Melville, nation, and democracy were integral to his "cunning" appeal to the postwar literary academy. As Paul Lauter has argued, in the decades leading up the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952, "Melville climbs the canon" and becomes an icon of national identity in

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[59] As Adam Bradley has documented, Ellison's spellings of Rinehart are inconsistent, oscillating between "Rine," "Rhine," "Rinehart," "Rhinehart," "Rineheart," and "Rhineheart" (130).

American literary studies–a "characteristic" representative of "American genius," or in Richard Chase's phrase, "the grandest expression of the American imagination" (Lauter 6, Chase 91). Throughout a series of essays, lectures, and university courses during the fifties and sixties, Ellison affirmed Melville's hypercanonical status and utilized several other tropes of exceptionalist critical discourse—a white canon centered on "classic" nineteenth-century literature, an emphasis on national identity, and a preoccupation with what F.O. Matthiessen called "the possibilities of democracy" (xv). Yet even as he collaborated with postwar Americanists, Ellison eloquently criticized these critics for overlooking the importance of race and slavery to the American literary imagination.

For this critical project, Melville presented Ellison with a particularly viable "symbol of authority," to borrow a term from Ellison's close friend Kenneth Burke (Burke 169).[60] On the one hand, Melville's writing presents

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[60] In short, Burke argues that the effective social critic must strategically deploy a discourse's "symbols of authority," and regard them as "as *real* a vein to be tapped into as any oil deposit in Teapot Dome" (169). Brian Crable has described Burke's influence on Ellison in ways that illuminate Ellison's relationship with Melville and Melville criticism: "Ellison studied Burke's writings intently, and as he later wrote Burke, these writings supplied the *foundation* for his own perspective: 'That

multiple black characters, characters who self-consciously perform versions of blackness, and a sustained attention to the social and political dynamics of interracial relationships. And on the other hand, decades before Ellison began his effort to "blacken" Melville, the "Melville revivers" had praised his work for its unsettling, illicit (albeit nonracial) "blackness." Raymond Weaver claimed in the first pages of the first Melville biography that "Melville sinned blackly against the orthodoxy of his time" (18). A few years later Lewis Mumford claimed that Melville "plunged into the cold black depths of the spirit" and "questioned the foundations upon which their [Americans'] vast superstructure of comfort and complacency was erected" (*Herman Melville* xv). Weaver and Mumford's language of blackness alludes to Melville's praise for Hawthorne's writing, which most Melvilleans interpret as a comment on

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is why I really feel indebted to you. Essentially the Negro situation is irrational to an extent which surpasses that of the rest of the world—though God knows that sounds impossible. Your method gave me the first instrument with which I could orient myself.' [. . .] Using the resources he found in Burke's writings, Ellison crafted his perspective on race and identity in America. For Ellison, this perspective represented, quite literarily, a counter-statement—an opportunity to lean against the prevailing American discourse surrounding race, and thereby gain equilibrium" (2-3).

Melville's own aesthetic. "It is that blackness in Hawthorne," Melville writes, "that so fixes and fascinates me"—"a blackness ten times black" ("Hawthorne" 1158-59). None these articulations of Melville's black aesthetic made explicitly racial claims, but perhaps they speak to why Ellison would have been drawn to Melville as a site for critical contestation. For Melville offered Ellison the opportunity to engage a critical discourse on literary "blackness" and enrich it by integrating political valences of slavery, racial exploitation, and the failures of American democracy.

Ellison began his integrative critical project with *Invisible Man*, which directly engaged American literary studies through allusions not only to Melville, but also to Melvilleans like Mumford. As Nadel has shown, Ellison's most obvious critical target is Mumford's "study of American literature and culture" *The Golden Day* (1926), the title chapter of which culminates in a reading of Melville's fiction. Mumford's "Golden Day" names the "climax" of American literary expression that occurred just before the Civil War, and as evidence of this exceptional moment, Mumford presents Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville—the very same writers who fifteen years later would constitute Matthiessen's widely influential "American Renaissance" (43). Nadel writes that

> *Golden Day* is an appropriate target for Ellison [. . .] not because it was the most significant book of its type but because it was

> one of the earliest and most typical: one that represents a typical whitewashing of American history. (94)

In *Invisible Man*, "the Golden Day" is the name of a bar that sits just off the campus of Ellison's fictionalization of Tuskegee. The narrator brings Norton, the white, northern college trustee, to this bar after visiting Trueblood. Ellison populates this "Golden Day" with angry, disillusioned, and highly articulate black World War I veterans who, when they returned to the U.S., were denied access to the professional careers for which they were trained during the war. In Ellison's "Golden Day," black voices confront Norton's ignorance of the discrimination and exploitation faced by blacks with precisely the kind of professional education that his money funds, and they scrutinize the inefficacy of his benign liberalism. For Ellison, the "Golden Day" thus becomes a site where black characters confront white ignorance about the failures of American democracy. "The Golden Day had once been painted white," Ellison writes; "now its paint was flaking away with the years, the scratch of a finger being enough to send it showering down" (*Invisible*, 197).

Ellison dedicated many of his essays to scraping white paint off of American literature and calling attention to the exclusionary reading practices of Americanists. Ellison's 1959 essay "Society, Morality, and the Novel" represents his most forthright criticism of the hermeneutics of whitewashing.

By applying "the bright pure light of their methods," Ellison argues, Americanists have obscured the most democratically valuable concerns of nineteenth-century American fiction—namely, racism and slavery ("Society" 698).[61] Ignoring these issues, he writes, "reduces the annoying elements to a minimum" and blunts "the moral intention of American prose fiction by way of making it easier for the reader" (724).

The "moral cutting edge" of American fiction that critics suppress, in Ellison's account, is its representation of African Americans as "the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan" ("Twentieth" 85). Despite their inept twentieth-century interpreters, according to Ellison, nineteenth-century writers—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Crane, and especially Twain and Melville—used black characters to mark the failures of American democracy. The exception to Ellison's claim about the suppression of race in twentieth-century literary discourse is William Faulkner, who Ellison argues

[61] Ellison rarely names the critics who he thinks have corrupted the American canon, but the title of his essay "Society, Morality, and the Novel" alludes to Lionel Trilling's "Manners, Morals, and the Novel" (published in 1950 as a chapter of *The Liberal Imagination*), which argues that "American writers of genius have not turned their minds to society" and points to the metaphysical flights of Melville as an example.

"brings us as close to the moral implications of the Negro as Twain or Melville" ("Twentieth" 98). Ellison argues that "the novel is a moral instrument, possessing for us an *integrative function,*" because in its best manifestations, it brings white and black Americans together and depicts them in the unfolding drama of American democracy. By ignoring race, Ellison argues, American critics "evade as much of [the novel's] moral truth as possible" (original emphasis; "Society" 718).

Ellison often speaks in "sweeping generalities" about American literature, as one interviewer put it, but in an essay about legal discrimination Ellison uses "Bartleby the Scrivener" and *Benito Cereno* to perform a concrete example of integrative criticism (*Conversations* 224). Ellison argues that legislative and judiciary racism dates back to the nation's foundation, when the Founding Fathers "committed the sin of racial pride" and "designated one section of the American people to be the sacrificial victims for the benefit of the rest" ("Perspective" 781). African Americans thus become "the exception" to democracy in America ("Perspective" 777). But because of this exceptional status, Ellison writes, "the Black American was endowed linguistically with an ambivalent power—'the power of the negative'" ("Perspective" 782). Ellison argues (as he does on many occasions) that African Americans represent a stinging nettle in the side of American democracy, a negation of its claims of "liberty and justice for all": "He

became a keeper of the nation's sense of democratic achievement, and the human scale by which would be measured its painfully slow advance toward true equality" ("Perspective" 782).

Ellison reads *Benito Cereno* and "Bartleby" as dramatizing this "power of the negative" possessed by the "exceptions" to American democracy. Both texts, he argues, center on a socially and economically established white character—"a representative of law and thus of order"—who benefits from America's selectively applied democracy. The narrator of "Bartleby," he writes, is "a Wall Street lawyer who, for all his good will, is as imperceptive in grasping the basic connotation as Captain Delano of *Benito Cereno* is unable to grasp the human complexity of the Africans who believed, like himself, so much in freedom that they would kill for it" ("Perspective" 775). The "basic connotation" that both characters (and their twentieth century interpreters) miss is that their beneficent democratic ideals are shattered by the characters who confront them during the story.

Ellison argues that Melville endows Bartleby with the same "power of the negative" possessed by African Americans, and that he functions in the story withinin the same symbolic order that blacks do in American political culture—as an "exception" to an otherwise functionally democratic and progressive state. "In reading the story," Ellison writes,

> one has the sensation of watching a man walking backward past every boundary of human order and desire saying "I prefer not to, I prefer not to," until at last he fades from sight and we are left with only the faint sound of his voice hanging thinly in the air, still saying no. Bartleby's last remaining force, the force which at the very last he is asked to give up, is the power of the negative. (776)

But "Bartleby is never forced or persuaded or cajoled to agree" (776). He maintains his "obstinate negativism," and in Ellison's reading, he effectively challenges the structure of a society that would abuse and imprison him in the same way that, Ellison argues, African Americans negate the efficacy of American democracy. Bartleby, according to Ellison, becomes symbolic of the resilient, haunting, and sobering voices of repudiation that African Americans bring to American political discourse.[62]

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[62] Ellison's argument here in many ways anticipates Toni Morrison's demand in 1988 for "the examination and reinterpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth-century works, [. . .] for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped [. . .] the meaning of so much American literature" (11). Perhaps due to Ellison's often demeaning attacks on the Black Arts Movement, she does not cite his writing about American

As his emphasis on national identity, "possibilities of democracy," and white canonical male authors demonstrates, Ellison's literary criticism to a significant degree ingratiates the exceptionalism of postwar Americanists. And Ellison's appeal to their literary and national values won him their favor. As Wright aptly argued, white literary critics embraced Ellison "as a quiet counterpoint to the discordant literature of Black Power," and they "evaded Ellison's attack on racist ideology" (16, 17). R.W.B. Lewis, Ellison's close personal friend, epitomized the literary academy's relationship with Ellison in a 1964 essay on Ellison's literary criticism. Lewis argued that Ellison's work surpassed the writings of other black authors because it moved beyond the idea of the black artist as a "wounded warrior," obsessed with the "struggle for racial justice." Not coincidently, Lewis also praised Ellison for writing about and working within the tradition of white canonical authors like Emerson, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner (46). But, Lewis notes, Ellison establishes his relationship with these canonical authors in the "beguilingly specialized terms" of race—terms that Lewis repudiates. "I am not quite convinced," Lewis writes, "that slavery and the Negro were as central to the imagination of Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Mark Twain as

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literature. But, as I discuss in my conclusion, she too bases her claim in a reading of Melville.

Ellison makes out" (47). Celebrating Ellison's writing as a repudiation of black radicalism and an endorsement of the white cannon, Lewis embraces the most conservative dimensions of Ellison's work without taking seriously his integrative arguments about race and democracy.

The sharp edge of Ellison's cultural criticism was also disregarded and misunderstood by participants in the Black Arts Movement, who repeatedly identified Ellison as a traitor to the cause of racial equality. Throughout the sixties, many black radicals began to castigate Ellison for his allegiance to cultural institutions traditionally controlled by whites. In an essay called "Philistinism and the Negro Writer," Amiri Baraka claimed that the white institution of academia had "silenced" Ellison, and consigned him to "fidgeting away in some college" (*Anger* 53). In 1970, *Black World*, a major journal of the Black Arts Movement, dedicated an entire issue to berating Ellison, in which Ernest Kaiser called him "an Establishment writer, an Uncle Tom, an attacker of the sociological formulations of the Black freedom movement." Later in the same issue, Clifford Mason wrote that "what might have been an instructive allusion to white writers in the 60s is Tomism in the 70s" (quoted in Bradley 57).

Ellison reveals his frustration with how his work was understood by both white and black intellectuals in an early-seventies letter to Irving Howe, with whom Ellison had sparred years before over the obligations of black

writers to produce "protest art"—an exchange that led to Ellison's acclaimed essay, "The World and the Jug" (1964-65). In the letter, Ellison appears exasperated—almost despairing—about living in a moment "when our best minds fail to trace the connections between the black community and the white, historically, morally, and culturally." Drawing out such connections is precisely what writing about Melville had allowed Ellison to do, but he appears deeply frustrated that no one would take his work seriously. "Denounced by young black militants" and surrounded by white critics like Lewis who "have given up completely on the task of critical evaluation of efforts at art—or thought—coming from anyone who is not white," Ellison felt "isolated" and worried that nothing he could write "would do any good." "What does one do," he asks, "now that the culture of the U.S. is referred to so glibly as 'white culture' and 'black culture'?" In such a racially divided world, the work of integrative criticism becomes impossible (50/11).[63]

Jackson argues that by the mid seventies Ellison "seemed to embrace" his conservative academic identity, and judging by Ellison's numerous lectures and course syllabi on white canonical authors and his

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[63] Citations of material from the Ellison papers at The Library of Congress—such as this letter to Howe—list the box and folder in which the cited documents can be found.

belittling attacks on the Black Arts Movement, Jackson seems right ("Integration" 174).[64] But at this same moment Ellison was struggling to finish a novel about a psychologically troubled, delusional, and destructive character who also attempts to deploy a racist discourse strategically, yet ultimately becomes indistinguishable from it. The manuscripts of his second novel seem written by a more self-critical Ellison than Jackson describes—an Ellison who doubts the efficacy of his own "invisible" mode of cultural criticism.

The Invisibility of Politics

The unfinished second novel reveals that Ellison's interests in Melville and the politics of invisibility persisted throughout his career, but it also betrays grave doubts regarding *Invisible Man*'s Rinehartian conclusion and Ellison's Rinehart-inspired "Western critical mask." If *Invisible Man* concludes with what Jackson calls "the permanent acceptance of and critical engagement with Rinehart," Ellison's second novel picks up where his first

[64] On several occasions Ellison demeans black radicalism. He accuses its adherents of "rejecting intellectual discipline" and subscribing to irrational mystifications of black identity that Ellison refers to as "blood magic and blood thinking" ("Indivisible" 370; "Little Man" 509).

one left off— with another "confidence man" named Bliss, who is much more fully fleshed out than his predecessor.[65] In the immensity of pages Ellison dedicated to Bliss, one witnesses his transition from a theatrical young preacher into a "confidence man," his emergence as a powerful "race-baiting" politician, and the hurt and outrage he brings to African Americans. In many ways, Bliss faces problems of misrecognition similar to those Ellison faced as a literary critic. As a senator who wears the racist mask of Adam Sunraider with the intention of entering the U.S. political system and subverting its racial injustices, Bliss in many ways practices an exaggerated version of Ellison's own shrewd exceptionalism and canon-based literary criticism.

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[65] Bradley presents conclusive archive evidence that the second novel's "Bliss" represents a direct continuation of *Invisible Man's* Bliss Proteus Rinehart: 1) he points to a deleted passage from *Invisible Man* in which a Brother from the Harlem office describes Rinehart as a "boy preacher who had grown up and passed for white and became . . . a reactionary writer on politics—with none but a few negroes the wiser"; 2) he examines a notebook of Ellison's titled "Novel: Opus II" in which a character who is raised by a black preacher and eventually passes as a racist politician is referred to throughout as "Rhinehart" (Bradley 125).

The effusive manuscripts of Ellison's second novel seem pulled in conflicting directions concerning the political possibilities and implications of Bliss. He is characterized both as a shrewd advocate of racial equality and as an Ahabian, self-obsessed demagogue who unleashes his American audience's deep-seated racism. Several characters, including Bliss himself, espouse an Ellisonian optimism about the subversive potential of cultural hybridity and skilled theatricality. While Bliss's public political identity is obscenely racist, he privately articulates beliefs about democracy and racial justice that mirror Ellison's arguments about the brokenness and hypocrisy of a "democratic" society that excludes segments of its population from the political community. But as the manuscripts tell the stories of dozens of black characters who are hurt and enraged by Bliss, the Ahabian portrait overwhelms more sympathetic characterizations. The subversive Babo-esque trickster disappears beneath the domineering public persona of Adam Sunraider– a name that alludes both to Ahab's intense hatred ("he piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down") and the delusional cosmic arrogance ("I'd strike the sun if it insulted me") that leads him to chase Moby-Dick (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 184, 164).

Trained from his youth by a powerful black minister—an office that Ellison describes as "manipulator of eloquence and emotions"— Bliss

achieves a level of "eloquence" and rhetorical power that evokes Ahab's demagogical authority over the crew of the *Pequod* ("Work in Progress"). Reverend Alonzo Hickman, a jazz man turned man of God, teaches Bliss the art of audience manipulation as he trains him to be a part of a grotesque evangelical performance.[66] Hickman would have Bliss carried down the center aisle in a coffin, and at a pre-determined moment, Bliss would burst out of the coffin, shout Christ's words from the cross—"Lord, Lord, Why has thou forsaken me?"— and then co-preach an antiphonal sermon with Hickman (*Three Days* 332-334).[67] After Bliss reaches the height of his power as Sunraider, Hickman worries that he had unknowingly instructed Bliss in

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[66] Michael Szalay has recently argued that Bliss's "commodification" of his identity as Adam Sunraider represents a betrayal of the "precapitalist wholeness" and the "prelapsarian moment of community in which Bliss lives happily within Hickman's congregation" (799, 810). But this strict dichotomy between Hickman and Bliss romanticizes Bliss's childhood with Hickman, which was fraught with racial, sexual, and financial anxieties. It also inaccurately describes the relationship between Bliss and Hickman, since Bliss first learns the practice of self-commodification from Hickman's highly theatrical evangelical sermons.

[67] Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical page citations in this section refer to Bradley and Callahan's *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010).

the art of "eloquence" during these powerfully effective sermonic performances. Anxiously, he wonders "whether I was conducting a con game or simply taking part and leading a mysterious prayer" (413).

In adolescence, Bliss runs away from Hickman's congregation and begins passing as white, but he continues using his training in eloquence and theatricality to manipulate the people around him. Indeed, he becomes a remarkably self-reflective master of deception and confidence games. Ellison on several occasions recounts Bliss's thoughts about his life as a confidence man, which often evoke cinematic imagery as a model for his performances. "Scenes dictate masks, and masks scenes," he says; Bliss believes he can that play any "scene" to his advantage if only he performs the right part (399). When the "scene" shifts, he shifts his identity along with it to maximize his power. After leaving Hickman, Bliss's life becomes a sequence of brief, spottily narrated "scenes" in which he cons a series of mostly black audiences by posing as an evangelical preacher, a Hollywood movie-maker, and a salesman of skin-whitener and hair-straightener. Bliss's life as a "confidence man" culminates in his identity as Senator Sunraider, who, like Ahab, is a demagogical master of inflammatory rhetoric. If Ahab "play[s] round" the "savageness" of his crew to exhort them in the hunt for the white whale, Sunraider manipulates the deep-seated racism of his constituents to gain and maintain his power (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 212).

But despite Sunraider's racist rhetoric, Hickman maintains political hope in Bliss. When Bliss was a child, Hickman had expressed a prophetic democratic hope in the young boy's prodigious rhetorical power—a power that Hickman believes results from Bliss's cultural hybridity. Hickman echoes Ellison's own defense of "cultural appropriation" and creative racial cross-pollination in essays such as "The Little Man at Cheehaw Station" (515). In this essay, Ellison celebrates the hybridized identity of a figure he calls the "American joker": "His garments were, literally and figuratively, of many colors and cultures, his racial identity interwoven of many strands" (511). An Ellisonian faith in the democratic possibilities of Bliss's hybridity—his white skin paired with his upbringing in black culture—leads Hickman to

> bring up the child in love and dedication in the hope that properly raised and trained, the child's color and features, his inner substance and his appearance would make it possible for him to enter into the wider affairs of the nation and work toward the betterment of his people and the moral health of the nation. (140/3)

Hickman believes Bliss's "mixture of blackness and whiteness" has

> endowed that child with a command of the Word which was so inspiring that we came to accept him as the living token and key

> to that world of togetherness for which our forefathers had hoped and prayed. (526)

"Because of his power and grace with the God-given word," Hickman continues, "we imagined him as a means of breaking the slavery-forged chains which still bind our country" (528). Bliss's "command of the Word" on one level obviously refers to his mastery of the Bible and his ability to use scripture effectively in his sermons. But it also refers to his power to deploy language itself—a power that Hickman believes is based in Bliss's "mixture" of racial identities.[68] Even after Bliss has transformed into Sunraider, Hickman holds out hope that his cross-cultural experience and powerful command of language will allow him to "speak for our condition from inside the only acceptable mask" and "embody our spirit in the councils of our enemies" (413).

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[68] Several characters link Bliss's chameleonic power to his mastery of "words" and language. When Bliss was a child, Hickman stressed to him that "words are your business boy! Not just the Word. Words are everything and don't you ever forget it" (251). Later in his life one character observes that "He sure knows how to use the words," and another says that in his con-man days before becoming a senator, he "had so many ways of speaking that nobody could pin him down" (1010, 895).

Privately, Bliss adheres to the same democratic hopes as Hickman. He articulates Ellisonian arguments about how American democracy has failed through its exclusion of blacks and expresses his desire to "destroy" this unfair system from the inside. In notes for the novel, Ellison imagines Bliss saying to himself, "Those who believe in democracy but insist on excluding the Negro really don't understand that this is the very foundation of the democratic ideal. Reject this foundation, and you reject the very essence of democracy" (140/2). Bliss's claim echoes Ellison's often-stated argument that the health of American democracy depends on "the inclusion, *not* assimilation, of the black man" as an equal member of the political community ("What" 586, original emphasis). "The senator understands the democratic ideal better than those who ascribe to liberalism," Ellison writes; "He also understands the weakness done [to] the system through the failure to accept it in its entirety, and he discussed techniques for destroying it" (140/2).

Bliss's technique for destroying the flawed American political system closely resembles *Invisible Man*'s "jujitsu of the spirit," or "denial and rejection through agreement" ("Change" 110). At one point in the manuscripts, Bliss asks himself, "HOW THE HELL DO YOU GET LOVE INTO POLITICS OR COMPASSION INTO HISTORY?" His paradoxical answer: "strike back hard in angry collaboration" (392). Ellison calls this "the strategy of a

guerilla fighter transposed to the world of politics" (*Juneteenth* 361). "Extend their vision until they disgust themselves, until they gag," Bliss tells himself; "Stretch out their nerves, amplify their voices, extend their grasp until history is rolled into a pall" (392). In his own self-conception, Bliss fights for racial equality by "yessing" in "angry collaboration." This mode of attacking a racist social structure deeply resonates with how Ellison—in interviews about *Invisible Man*—describes what the narrator learns from his grandfather and Rinehart: "to collaborate with its destruction of its own values" (*Conversations* 76).

But Bliss's racist identity as Sunraider ultimately gets away from him, takes on a life of its own, and eclipses the commitment to racial equality that inspired Bliss's entry into politics. Bliss performs racism purely for its power to ingratiate his audience, but his spectacular rhetoric slips out of his control—a slippage that destabilizes the boundary between ironic performance and complicit embrace. This slippage comes into focus as several voices from black communities exploited by Bliss recount the destructive effects of his racialized con games. Two of the most expressive of these voices are a savant named Cliofus and an "aspiring intellectual" named Walker Millsap, who both explicitly compare Bliss to Ahab. Both of these characters are accorded significant authority within the novel, the former as a voice of black "community conscience" and the latter as an educated,

thoughtful writer, who frequently draws on an intensive knowledge of history and literature in his study of racial identities in America (860). Cliofus and Millsap embarrass and undermine Hickman and Bliss's Ellisonian hopes in the democratic confidence man. Rather than love or compassion, these characters (among others) show that Bliss in reality brings vitriol, fear, and hatred into racial politics in the U.S. His "angry collaboration," in their accounts, collapses into mere collaboration, and Bliss becomes indistinguishable from the racism that he attempts to sabotage.

In a difficult, nightmarish segment of the manuscripts, Cliofus suggests that Bliss's race-baiting rhetoric is a degrading exploitation of African Americans by figuring Bliss as an "Ahab" who kills and showcases a "black whale" (880). Cliofus is called the "unblinking eye of community conscience" for a group of African Americans in Oklahoma City (Ellison's hometown) who were particularly damaged by one of Bliss's pre-Sunraider scams and who kept track of him after he became a senator (860). Bliss's scam involved preying on the black community's desire for equality by claiming to be a director and soliciting donations for a dubious "Hollywood movie" that would star African American actors. Bliss also seduced a beautiful young woman under false pretenses, and just before killing herself she gave birth to his son, who would grow up to be the man who shoots Sunraider. Cliofus's name (evoking the muse of history) entails that he

understands and bears responsibility for mediating the community's traumatic past, even though he often expresses their history in opaque, hardly intelligible, yet entertaining parables. Cliofus works as a storyteller and toast-giver at a bar, where the audience seems to have heard his story about "Ahab" many times. One character tellingly describes Cliofus as an "oracle," who "mixes what really happened with tales he's been told, books he's read, and stories he makes up" in order to communicate the community's history (848). Cliofus's synthesis of community history with fictional narrative manifests itself in his Melvillean rendering of Bliss as an Ahab who brandishes an embalmed, bedecked black whale to entertain his audiences.

When asked to describe Bliss, Cliofus launches into an arcane, disturbing story about going on a field trip with his kindergarten class to "see the great whale" (879). After walking "way down in the bowels of downtown," they find the whale, and the children are appalled. "He was rubbery and black and it took three flat cars to support him," Cliofus remembers. As Miss Kindly, his teacher, tries to give the children a lesson about the difference between fish and mammals, Cliofus and his peers fixate upon the horrific "black whale," "full of embalming fluid" and surrounded by "light bulbs suspended above him from head to tail, and [. . .] two big red ones which stuck out of the sockets where his eyes had been." Cliofus also

remembers that the whale had several "rope-dangling harpoons stuck in his hump [that] trembled whenever a truck rolled past" (880).

This parodic synthesis of Bliss and Ahab becomes more transparent as the children lose interest in Miss Kindly's biology lesson, and "a little old white man" appears and "comes hobbling toward us on a short wooden leg" (882). This "Ahab" figure demands "a nickel apiece just for looking at the whale" and a dime more for the story of how he killed it. Miss Kindly pays the man, and he "swears that after he harpooned the whale from his boat and got dragged through foaming seas for two hundred miles and a quarter, the whale jumped salty, knocked a hole in his boat and bit off his leg." To keep the kids' attention, "Ahab" "pulls a switch to make the whale's red eyes flash" and "gives a twist to some kind of valve," and the whale starts "spouting" water as "Ahab" laughs and shouts, "Thar she blows!" (883).

Cliofus's "Ahab" has converted the black whale into a spectacle by replacing its eyes and inner organs with grotesque adornments to attract and amuse a crowd—an apt allegory for Bliss's degradation of black identity. An embalmed whale adorned by lights and equipped with glowing eyes and a switch-activated spout: this, Cliofus provocatively suggests, is what Bliss

makes out of African Americans in order to entertain his audiences and sustain his power.[69]

Ellison further elaborates Bliss's kinship with Ahab in Millsap's long letter to Hickman, who had hired Millsap to find and keep track of Bliss just before he emerged as Sunraider. Full of philosophical, literary, and obscure historical references, this almost comically intellectual letter details Bliss's relationship with a Babo-esque trickster named Sippy—a "confidence man" who "trained" Bliss (693). Skilled in performance and rhetoric, Bliss, Millsap writes, was "made to order for Sippy's ultimately subversive plan" (698). Like Babo, Sippy "can manipulate the stereotype role thrust upon him" to achieve "power": Babo's performative "debonair" behavior "about his

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[69] Although he does not mention Cliofus, Szalay insightfully argues that *Three Days Before the Shooting* is a text deeply concerned with "whose political interests fantasies of blackness were mobilized" to serve (796). Szalay maintains that Bliss represents Ellison's figuration of "hip" Democrats such as John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who attempted to garner support by subtly aligning themselves with what Szalay calls "black style" (798-799). Szalay's argument sketches a compelling political context for Cliofus's Ahabian portrayal of Bliss as having subdued, captured, and commodified a "black whale"—symbolizing his relationship with African American culture.

master" becomes Sippy's "ironic, debonair respect" for white people, which he performs as he "operates behind the mask of a genial but not too intelligent butler, waiter, bellhop, chauffeur, or yardman" (687, 694). Millsap writes that Sippy's performances of servility undermine the power of his white audiences without their even knowing it. He can "lure them into a serene quicksand of black-and-white illusion and leave them as naked as fledgling jaybirds while strutting like the king who wore no clothes"—a reversal of power resonant with Babo's manipulation of Delano (686). Millsap believes that Sippy's equalizing "hustle" has powerful democratic implications. The power it affords Sippy is his only chance at "a fair share of American democracy," and its shrewd reversal of black-and-white power dynamics ironizes America's claim to "freedom and justice for all" by exposing "the difference between reality and an as-yet unfleshed ideal" (695).

But as Millsap's "little saga" continues, Bliss eventually abandons Sippy after receiving "a free-wheeling Ph.D's instruction" in con games (698). Soon after, he becomes what Millsap refers to as "a young mammy-made Ahab"(685). Not knowing that Hickman had raised Bliss, Millsap speculates that Bliss had been "some kind of poor orphan of a white boy who, as a child, had passed through the loving hands of some Negro nursemaid or cook who treated him as one of her own" (684). Such a child usually at some point "adopt[s] attitudes more in keeping with its acclaimed racial

superiority," but Bliss, Millsap thinks, failed to sever his connection to his black mammy, and he thus still longs for the love and community of his childhood and suppresses guilt for abandoning them (686). Bliss's incomplete severance from his black caretaker has created what Millsap calls "an unmistakable air of defiant loneliness"—a self-perpetuated refusal of all human attachment that resembles Ahab's self-imposed isolation from both his crew and his wife and child ashore. Millsap implicitly compares Ahab's severed limb to Bliss's severed relationship with the black community that raised him: both losses render unhealing psychic wounds that lead to obsession, exploitation, and self-destruction.

"Mammy-made Ahab" is also a phrase that fuses Bliss's powerful "mixture of blackness and whiteness" and the destructive ends to which Bliss puts this mixture. In the context of the letter, "mammy-made" clearly refers to Millsap's vaguely psychoanalytic theory about Bliss's upbringing. But Ellison uses the phrase elsewhere to indicate, as John Kevin Young writes, "a transgression or mixture of ostensibly pure racial categories" (174). Young points to Ellison's 1952 letter to Murray, in which he calls himself a "mammy-made novelist" because he published the Prologue to *Invisible Man* in *The Partisan Review*—a journal edited, written, and read predominately by white intellectuals (Ellison, "Before Publication" 32). As Jackson points out, before this Ellison had published his fiction mostly in journals with a small

black readership, and he "wanted more prestige": "What he needed," writes Jackson, "was publicity and the imprimatur of high art" (433-34). The phrase "mammy-made novelist," Young argues, is how Ellison "acknowledges the impure roots of his novel's public appearance" (174).

With this in mind, "mammy-made Ahab" takes on deeper resonances that speak to the complex layers of Ellison's interest in Melville: his presentation of his work to white audiences, his fervid commitment to mixtures of racial categories, and his hope in the democratic power of the racial "joker." In Millsap's account, Bliss's "mixture of blackness and whiteness" and his resulting theatrical power renders not a democratic savior, as Hickman hopes, but "a monster with two heads inhabiting a single body" (685).

Millsap's account of Bliss in many ways recapitulates Ellison's own complicated attitudes toward the politics of invisibility. His "little saga" of Bliss's transformation from a democratic confidence man into to a "mammy-made Ahab" reflects the stark differences between Ellison's representations of racial performativity in *Invisible Man* and in the unfinished second novel. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison expresses hope in Bliss Proteus Rinehart's "multiple parts" as the basis for subversive, democratizing performances. But when Ellison attempted to practice something like Rinehart's democratic

performativity with his "Western Critical Mask," his ostensibly subversive ingratiation of the postwar academy backfired: it allowed Ellison to be deracialized and treated as a white-canon-building cultural conservative by both liberal academics and radical intellectuals. In the second novel, Rinehart's more fully fleshed-out counterpart, Bliss, aspires to use such performativity in the service of democratic, anti-racist ends, but he ends up perpetrating the very racist system he set out to undermine, and he is ultimately destroyed by the offspring of his own deceptive power.

Winfried Fluck has argued that political hope in "performance or performativity" and "flexible, multiple identities" represents "the new mantra in Cultural and American studies" (78, 79). I want to conclude by suggesting that Ellison's fraught relationship with the democratic confidence man—a relationship that culminates in his fractured and skeptical portrait of Bliss—challenges us to reconsider this "mantra," which remains fashionable in contemporary Ellison scholarship and in critical and cultural theory more broadly. This political hope resembles the faith that Hickman and his congregation invest in Bliss's racial hybridity and skilled theatricality—only to be left, in Hickman's words, "puzzled by the wreck of our dreaming" (527). Ellison's struggle to communicate from behind his "Western critical mask" and his conflicted representations of Bliss antagonize any stable distinction between performatively sabotaging and destructively affirming a hegemonic

discourse. Without this distinction, the subversive potential of the democratic trickster threatens to mutate into the manipulative and destructive Ahabian power of Sunraider. Ellison's writing about Bliss thus suggests that while strategic performativity may be a valuable and pragmatic means of acquiring power, it should not be thought of as inherently liberatory or even subversive. For such performativity may betray the democratic oppositional motivations of those who practice it, and it may also, as it does for Bliss, lead to destructive delusions of political efficacy.

Conclusion

"the vision of innocence and the claim of newness"

The title to this short conclusion alludes to R.W.B. Lewis's claim that an American obsession with innocence has produced "a dismissal of the past" and "a habit of forgetfulness" (9). Lewis, of course, refers to the infamous thematic of "the American Adam," which he argues characterizes America's "staccato intellectual and literary movements" (9). But a disavowal of guilty history and a vision of radical oppositionality against it are also dominant trends of the last thirty years of Americanist criticism. During that time, many have condemned critical texts like Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955) for neglecting women writes, ethnic minorities, and popular literatures, for skirting issues of race and gender, and ultimately for perpetuating a patriarchal, white American nationalism. While this denunciation is unquestionably justified and deeply valuable to the democratization of American literary studies, it has also enabled an overly-simplistic disciplinary narrative: a vision of a radical cut from an ostensibly corrupt past. This familiar narrative of "moral superiority," to return to Fleissner's arresting language, has obscured the complex political work of postwar Americanist criticism and fueled a wearisome professional culture in which one feels, to quote Winfried Fluck, "a constant pressure to outradicalize others" (56).

The very existence of this dissertation might suggest that these powerful trends of critical oppositionalism are loosening, and this loosening can also be felt in

recent calls for a greater "attention to the ways in which knowledge is produced in the field," to quote Winfried Fluck (67). Following Fluck, Robyn Wiegman has challenged Americanists to be more cognizant of how our critical work always falls short of fulfilling the political desires that animate it. And Caleb Smith, in the inaugural issue of *J19*, gestures toward what he somewhat ironically calls a "reflexive turn," in which we might become more cognizant of, as he puts it, "the always contested and compromised" histories in which our work takes place—histories that are "never outside structures of power"(165). Smith's name for this latest among a dizzying array of "turns" is ironic because the New Americanists from whom it turns away actually initiated the project of disciplinary self-reflexivity when they condemned their predecessors as servants of Cold War nationalism and its attendant qualities of racism, masculinism, and imperialism. Fluck, Wiegman, and Smith's calls for disciplinary reflexivity should, therefore, be heard as efforts to return to and reanimate one of the central imperatives of the New Americanism. This dissertation has aimed to corroborate this call for greater reflexivity, and to respond to it by attending to the emergence and persistence of a powerful attachment to Melville among critics in the field and intellectuals and artists on its fringes—an attachment that remains alive in criticism, imaginative writing, and hybrids of the two.

This attachment takes shape in a politically multivalent form that I have called "the romance with Melville"—a form that found a sort of abstract crystallization in Gilles Deleuze's essay, "Bartleby; or, the Formula" (1993). For Deleuze, "the biggest

problem haunting Melville's oeuvre"—and, I would add, Melville's readers—is the problem of "the pure outsider" (73). This outsider, Deleuze writes, always reveals "the world as masquerade" (82). As the outsider makes visible "its emptiness" and "the imperfection of its laws," the world becomes mere forms to be manipulated, criticized, or changed (83). Deleuze claims that the outsider—who in this dissertation has appeared as same-sex desire, the transnational working class, and racial "exceptions" to American democracy—confounds and destabilizes "the Universal or the whole," "the paternal authority" (88). The outsider thus always brings "the *democratic* contribution": the irritation that pushes toward the unfulfillable fulfillment of "America"—its promise of "universal immigration" and its promise to become a permeable space of integration that is ever "open to all contacts" (87). "The world" loses its solidarity, Deleuze writes, in favor of "an infinitely proliferating patchwork: the American patchwork becomes the law of Melville's oeuvre" (77). At this point it becomes clear that even in its most radical, cosmopolitan, deconstructive manifestations, the romance remains entangled with patriotic piety, national essence, and an almost utopic hope in variously envisioned democratic futures. While there are many varieties in content and tone, this fundamentally conflicted form—or "formula"—persists mostly intact from Melville's proud and also blackly shrouded emergence into Americanist discourse in the 1920s to the present.

After Ellison's fraught, strikingly reflexive wrestling with this duality of the romance, several other imaginative adaptations display a similar dynamic between

"outsiders" and "America." Robert Lowell, for instance, brought the concerns of Ellison and James together in his Civil-Rights Era stage production of *Benito Cereno*, in which Babo—no longer silent—becomes the eloquent voice of the oppressed third world before the consummate American, Amasa Delano, who appears dressed in red, white, and blue (staged 1965; published 1968). Thomas King's more recent novel, *Green Grass Running Water* (1994)—a title that evokes the broken promises of U.S. treaties with Native Americans—links Melville to the intertwined histories of Indian Removal and environmental exploitation, as Bartleby's "I'd prefer not to" becomes the mantra of a defiant Native American who is asked to move so that a dam can be built. Similarly, Leslie Marmon Silko praises Melville's "anatomy" of anti-native ideology in "The Metaphysics of Indian Hating"; it is "a mighty prophecy and a great moral vision," she writes. Her novel of Native American genocide, *Almanac of the Dead*, she says is "an homage of sorts to Melville" (98). One of the only feminist versions of the romance is Sena Jeter Naslund's *Ahab's Wife.* This novel centers on the originally peripheral character it names—a shift of focus that was inspired, Naslund says, by her frustration that a book in which "half the human race is ignored" could be considered "The Great American Novel" (3). In all these cases, one sees the formula: the "outsider" makes a claim on "America," antagonizing its order and coherence while simultaneously betraying a deep attachment to it as a political and symbolic entity.

This same dynamic resonates throughout the history of Melville criticism—a good sign for Melvilleans, since it indicates that their concerns have broad cultural relevance. From its earliest manifestations to the present, the romance has gathered critics and imaginative writers, bringing together what James would call "criticism and life" ("Letters 231). The critical and the creative powerfully converge in Toni Morrison's writing about Melville, much as they had in Ellison's. Not unlike Ellison, Morrison uses Melville to unveil "the informing and determining Afro-American presence in traditional American literature" ("Unspeakable" 145). Morrison praises Melville for his "recognition of the moment in America when whiteness became an ideology." In her topsy-turvy reading of *Moby-Dick*, the white whale becomes this monstrous ideology, and Ahab becomes "the only white American heroic enough to try and slay the monster" ("Unspeakable" 143).

Counterintuitive as Morrison's reading seems, I think she is in some sense right to identify Ahab as the hero of ideology critique. For his hatred of evil, moral fervor, and iconoclastic rebellion reverberate in the intense political desires of many still dominant New Americanist voices. As these desires for radical oppositionality were directed against the "old" voices in the field, the New Americanism's romance with Melville made the Old Americanism into the "paternal authority" that Melville's work confounds and subverts. Donald E. Pease, James H. Kavanagh, and William V. Spanos all perform elaborate, transhistorical readings of *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* to show that Melville "prolepticly"—to use Spanos's term—condemns the Cold War

consensus that had "hegemonized" Melville's work.[70] Other critical arguments from this political turn in American literary studies—such as Michael Paul Rogin's presentation of Melville as a sort of "American Marx," Caroline L. Karcher's explication of Melville's anti-racism, Robert K. Martin and Eve Sedgwick's uses of Melville to articulate an anti-homophobic politics—were less explicitly hostile to their critical predecessors. But this work has nonetheless played into what Fleissner has called "the self-congratulatory narrative of progress toward the present moment"—a narrative that congratulates the "new" for critiquing and thus triumphing over the hegemonic complicities of the "old"("After" 174).

The "allure" of "critique, " Smith perceptively writes, is that it is "a way of knowing" that offers "the consolatory promise of noncomplicity in a corrupt order" (161). Wiegman has compellingly claimed that directing this "way of knowing" at "the Old Americanism" is a defining character of the field's contemporary identity. American literary studies, Weigman argues, is a field largely defined by "a politics of identificatory refusal aimed at [. . .] its predecessor" (*Object* 201). For the past thirty years, she argues, Americanists have presented these predecessors as "complicit" in a hegemonic order, "figured (non)complicity as a choice," and pursued "the fantastic wish for an uncontaminated future" (*Object* 200, 238). Even in Castiglia and

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[70] See Spanos, *Errant* 38; Pease "Cultural Persuasion" 415; Kavanagh, "Liberal Hero" 377.

Fleissner's recent "reparative" returns to "old" critics like Arvin and Chase, the voice from the critical past is invested with this critique-based power of noncomplicity—a power that only more recent Americanists have imagined themselves as possessing.

My problems with this reparative mode of returning to critical history notwithstanding, I want to acknowledge that it was Castiglia and Fleissner who first persuaded me to consider postwar criticism as part of a response to the pressing question: after critique, what? But it seems to me that neither the paranoid nor the reparative approach to critical history helps us with this question, because both, to borrow more of Sedgwick's language, "narrow one's choices to accepting or refusing" the hegemonic (*Touching* 12). Both, that is to say, obscure what is most challenging and valuable about postwar criticism: the self-conscious, reflective occupation of what Sedgwick calls "the middle ranges of agency" (*Touching* 13). The tired, barren poles of the subversive and the complicit do not very well describe the messy dynamics of the romances with Melville I've analyzed: Ellison's fraught performances of canonical criticism; James's negotiation between appeals to literary nationalism and criticisms of nationalistic totalitarianism; and Chase, Arvin, Forster, and Britten's careful attention to the seductions and cruelties of postwar heteronormativity. These critical and creative renderings of Melville represent a mode of ideological engagement other than critique—a mode of engagement that appeals to and sometimes overtly affirms hegemonic ideologies, but that also draws out their exclusionary, unjust, and violent and ramifications.

What comes of attending to these "middle ranges of agency" that I've found in the romance with Melville? What new modes of writing criticism might open if we approach critical history in these terms?

One cannot deny that much has been gained in eschewing these middle ranges. For identifying clear enemies and heroes of the fight against oppression has undeniably been a vital part of bringing the field to its current radically democratic orientation. The New Americanism's denunciation of their predecessors also marked the first intensive interrogations of the politics of Americanist discourse—an important project to which this dissertation contributes.

But in a moment in which radical oppositionalism has become a professional mandate and in which many voice frustration with the political heroics of ideology critique, I think there is more to be gained from attending to the "contested and compromised" histories of the textual attachments, hermeneutic practices, and political ambitions that persist through the major cuts in disciplinary history.

With striking pertinence to the recent sense that critique is "out of steam," in 1953 Arvin wrote that "the habit of rejection, of repudiation [. . .], has ceased to seem relevant or defensible" (*America* 6). Later in the same volume of the *Partisan Review*, Chase elaborated a resonant alternative to this adversarial disposition which I referred to in my introduction—a practice he calls "dissidence from within" (*America* 30). Unlike ideology critique, it is "an unheroic mission," Chase says, and it is "not for those who insist on purity or perfect rationality in their view of history or of morals,

nor for those who imagine that to reject or accept America is still their option" (*America* 30). Here Chase discusses the critics' relationship with the "damaging and cruel" ideologies that structure "American life" (27). But I want to conclude by thinking about what "dissidence from within" could mean for the field of Americanist criticism, and for how we engage with our critical predecessors, whether they be "new" or "old."

It would mean a greater acknowledgement and examination of one's place in longstanding, broad discursive histories that reach in and out of the field—histories that we cannot wholly "reject or accept." It would mean a renewed attention to the deep genealogical lineaments of our attachments to writers like Melville and of our desires to use these writers to understand national identity and to advance democracy. It would thus mean reading "old" criticism for other reasons than to attack the unwitting complicity of one's predecessors. It would mean trying to transition from citing other critics for the purpose of carving out space for oneself, to citing them for the purpose of historicizing one's own interests, textual fixations, and critical aspirations.

By more consciously acknowledging the attachments and desires that we share with our predecessors, we could more readily interrogate the ways in which our work humbly floats in the broader currents of critical history and imaginative production—currents, as I have shown, that erode boundaries of nation, genre, and profession. Such acknowledgement might help us to step aside from the cycles of oedipal

iconoclasm that have become so familiar and, for many, so frustrating. This mode of critical sociality would, of course, run against the professional protocols of advancing ideas and careers. These protocols are so ingrained into our interpretive practices that it is almost impossible to get out of the language and mindset of critiquing and throwing aside our critical antecedents, even when, in principle, that is precisely what one aspires to do. My own at times ungenerous criticisms of the New Americanism betray these difficulties, and in this sense this dissertation also continues what Wiegman calls "the familiar quest to outrun the familiar and the disciplinary demand that regenerates it" (*Object* 326). But I also hope that my analysis of the romance with Melville has demonstrated how a more "reflexive" approach to studying literature could perhaps open less familiar ways of meeting this disciplinary demand, and I hope to have persuaded my readers of this approach's value to the increasingly critique-weary field of American literary studies.

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