When I began this project, I had a relatively simple objective. I wanted to explain somewhat more fully than had previously been done how it was that Herman Melville was transformed during the 1920s from an obscure teller of South Sea Island tales into the preeminent American novelist—at least for many reputable critics. But I was derailed from that relatively clear historical path into murkier cultural terrain. I found myself asking what the critics who were reviving Melville in that period had at stake in constructing his image as they did: into what contest for cultural authority was Melville being conscripted? I want to begin with how that shift in focus came about because it raises certain questions about the meaning of “Herman Melville” in literary study.

When I talk about the literary canon or teach my course on “Race, Gender, and the Canon” at Trinity College, I generally begin with an exercise. I ask the participants to write on a piece of paper the names of five or perhaps ten American books or writers they think an educated person should have read—“educated” being defined as having completed a B.A. degree. I collate the responses into a small sample literary canon. There are seldom many real surprises, though there are some local variations. Twain scores at or near the top, together with Fitzgerald—at least in the Northeast—Faulkner, Hemingway, and a couple of other men like Steinbeck. Then, trailing along, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and nowadays Alice Walker or, more likely, Toni Morrison.

What I found altogether odd when I did this exercise to begin my class two years ago was that the one writer left off—with not a single vote among the one hundred or more registered in my poll, the one writer whose stories some of the students had before them on the table—that

one writer was Herman Melville. This gave me pause. After all, as one of
my students later said, most of them had been assigned to read *Moby-Dick*
high school and had hated it. Didn’t that definitively qualify Melville
as a classic, canonical writer? Not apparently for these students. I began
to wonder whether this omission had occurred in earlier such exercises,
and I had just not noticed it or had attributed the void to chance. So I
went back to the results of a similar poll of secondary-school teachers I
had done about a year before and, sure enough, Melville had received but
one vote there, along with everyone from Ira Levin to Lydia Sigourney.
Unscientifically, I took these results as straws in a wind. And I felt that
I needed to understand when it had begun to blow and from what quarter.
I began by asking my students, who gave me some interesting answers.
“You really feel belittled when you’re reading Melville,” one said. “I know
this is art, and I can’t understand it.” “You feel,” another added, that
“something’s wrong with you; that you’re missing something.” My stu-
dents seemed actively to dislike Melville, to feel humiliated by the prose
and ignorant before the dense web of Melville’s allusive, syntactically
intricate style and his convoluted plotting.

What were my students expressing? I want to suggest that in some
sense Melville had become for them a representative of what they hated
about their academic training. Or, to broaden out that remark toward
the thesis of this paper: precisely the quality in Melville that critics and
professors of the twenties found enthralling, indeed, what critics and
professors continue to find enthralling in Melville—it was just *that* that
my students were most put off by. And that hostility, which they could
seldom register directly, emerged in the results of my poll. Moreover,
their accounts of the reasons they had omitted Melville were legitimated
by the very unanimity of that response, permitting them to say what they
had been taught it was not legitimate even to think, at least in college
classrooms.

Before I proceed, I need to reassure my readers that this essay is
not an effort to enlist Melville’s texts for my own political program. Nor
do I wish to join my students (and probably a long, long line of under-
graduate readers) in attacking Melville as a writer. In a sense, this essay
is not even about Melville. It is, rather, about Melville’s reputation and
how it was constructed and deployed. For my own part, I agree with the
majority of critics and professors who champion Melville’s virtues. To
be sure, academics may argue violently whether Captain Vere in “Billy
Budd” is a god-like dispenser of even-handed justice or a nascent fascist
pig, but unlike my students most finally come to agree that, "damn it all, sir, Melville ought to be read!" My concern is not with how academics dispute Melville's values but with how we largely agree about his value. I will claim, in fact, that the rise of Melville's reputation in the 1920s may be taken to represent the ascent of the ideology we call "modernism" and of the academy and its adjuncts in the hierarchy of cultural authority.

In mid-February of 1919, the New York City newspapers began to run long stories announcing the imminent celebration of the centenary of James Russell Lowell, poet, man of letters, ambassador to the Court of St. James, and longest-serving president of the Modern Language Association (though I have to admit that that last fact was strangely omitted from any of the accounts and editorials I have found). The sponsors of the four-day celebration, the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, wished to use the occasion to underline the unity of the English-speaking nations and thus invited distinguished representatives of the arts and letters from Great Britain and Canada to address one or another of the events held at Columbia University, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and the University Club. In the major speech, reported the New York World, the British novelist John Galsworthy claimed that a country's most lasting good "comes from rectitude of conduct and the work of thinkers." "Perfected language," Galsworthy continued in tones echoed throughout the events, "is the cement of the spirit, mortar linking the bricks of our thoughts into a single structure of ideals and laws, painted and carved with the rarities of fancy, the manifold forms of Beauty and Truth." Further, according to the World, Galsworthy told an audience including Mrs. Andrew Carnegie and Miss Carnegie, Admiral and Mrs. Albert Gleaves, Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, and Sir Richard and Lady Crawford that England and America have reaped from the "grim years of war the promotion of our common tongue to the position of the universal language."2

Alas, the Lowell celebration did little to promote rectitude and magnanimity in national conduct, much less the peaceful and harmonious outlook for which celebrants eulogized Lowell. The year 1919 seemed to confirm in shrill propaganda, conflict, and bloodshed precisely the anxieties of the Lowell celebrants that their old order was passing. American and British troops in Archangel were engaged in battle against the Bolsheviki, even while Allied leaders tried to impose a victory settlement on
an increasingly socialist Germany, and Woodrow Wilson was beginning the ultimately losing process of restraining Allied greed and senatorial jealousy. All Europe except the Western Front seemed “swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight”; in the American press, at least, Béla Kun was in and out of power almost daily, while the armies of Denikin and Kolchak regularly announced the downfall of Bolshevik rule. At home, the Prohibition amendment was beginning to turn the normal social habits of middle-class Americans into petty lawlessness; the woman’s suffrage bill was finally passed by the whole Congress and sent to the states for ratification; the “Fighting Quaker,” A. Mitchell Palmer, with the help of a network of federal agents and American Legionnaires, was busily deporting reds, blacks, and pinks; the city of Seattle was, for a week and more, closed down by a general strike; and—even as black regiments like New York’s famed 369th returned from fighting—a series of pogroms in twenty-five U.S. cities, beginning in Washington, D.C. and rising to a climax of terror in Chicago, reduced many of the nation’s urban black communities to smoking, bloody ruins. Meanwhile in Boston, on a lighter note, the Red Sox had traded Babe Ruth to the Yankees, the cops had gone out on strike, and the one-piece bathing suit had been banned from the city beaches. Even allowing for the generally hysterical tone of the nation's press, one must acknowledge that 1919 was a year of contention, indeed revolution, especially from the point of view of America’s comfortable classes, including its intellectuals. As one businessman wrote to the attorney general, “There is hardly a respectable citizen of my acquaintance who does not believe that we are on the verge of armed conflict in this country.”

Moreover, in 1919 what many native-born Americans viewed as a “deluge” of immigration, interrupted by the war, resumed. Between 1901 and 1920 over 14.5 million immigrants came to these shores, particularly from Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Czarist Russia. Although the foreign-born and their children, together with African Americans, did most of the hard work in mining, manufacture, and construction, they remained—with their presumptively curious dialects, strange religions, and exotic cultures—alien if not positively menacing to established classes of Americans. Debating the first of a series of bills restricting immigration in 1921, Congressman James V. McClintic of Oklahoma described practically every one of the arrivals he had observed at Ellis Island as “weak, small of stature, poorly clad, emaciated” and with “less than $50 to his credit.” This climate of fear and prejudice in the im-
mediate aftermath of the war encouraged a variety of efforts to reassert the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon society: the Ku Klux Klan trumpeted the dominance of white, Protestant America; the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti turned into a social imperative; the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 excluded Japanese altogether and virtually halted immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe; Western Civilization requirements spread through the nation’s major universities. Even Harvard discovered that it had a “Jewish problem” when, by 1920, second and third generation Jews came to constitute as much as twenty percent of its student body. “It is the duty of Harvard,” President Abbott Lawrence Lowell wrote privately to the Board of Overseers, “to receive just as many boys who have come, or whose parents have come, to this country without our background as we can effectively educate; including in education the imparting, not only of book knowledge, but of ideas and traditions of our people.” 5 Communities, Congress, the courts, and the colleges became arenas wherein struggles for authority would be contested between the culturally powerful and those they saw as sources of opposition or even of chaos.

No wonder, then, that to a younger generation of intellectuals, the celebration of Lowell’s centenary must have seemed as anachronistic as Lowell’s beard. I imagine them looking back into the nation’s earlier history for a new champion, someone who might uphold against British condescension American claims to an equality in culture which would be consonant with America’s established title to military and diplomatic parity. A writer, too, who might stand in the cynical winds blowing from modern artistic horizons but who would, nevertheless, sustain certain established American values now at contest. Who would they choose? What qualities would professors desire and critics seek? Why might one writer be preferred to others?

A variety of candidates from the centennial class of 1919 presented themselves: Pulitzer’s New York World had, indeed, surveyed the field of writers born in 1819.6 There was Walt Whitman, of course; but his very popularity among those of anarchistic and even German sympathies made him an inappropriate choice.7 There was Susan Warner, but her books, as an Evening Post writer mentioned, while once wildly popular now “stood on one of the upper shelves of the small press that held the Sunday-school library.” Besides, like Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth and Julia Ward Howe, she was female and author of “many less famous writings than The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”8 The rest of the 1819
roster, Samuel Longfellow, Josiah Gilbert Holland—the Timothy Titcomb of mid-century letters—and Thomas Dunn English, among others, inspired no one. Another obscure novelist, one Herman Melville, was not even included in the World’s list. But it was Melville, as we know, who fit the bill. The question here is why.

I want to advance a number of claims. They have to do with the impact of the centennial itself, with the South Sea island connection and the involvement of Melville with that charmed locus of the “primitive,” with the image of Melville as the archetypical misunderstood American genius, with the appeal of his complex texts to modernist and particularly academic predilections, with the continuing allure of his books to grown-up boys, and finally, when he had begun to achieve “classic” status, with how his canon could be reassessed to conform to changing critical priorities. I want to argue that, in the main, “Melville” was constructed in the 1920s as part of an ideological conflict which linked advocates of modernism and of traditional high cultural values—often connected to the academy—against a social and cultural “other,” generally, if ambiguously, portrayed as feminine, genteel, exotic, dark, foreign, and numerous. In this contest a distinctively masculine, Anglo-Saxon image of Melville was deployed as a lone and powerful artistic beacon against the dangers presented by the masses; creating such an image entailed overlooking issues of race, eroticism, democracy, and the like, which have become commonplaces of contemporary Melville criticism.

* * *

The centennial celebration of Melville, however small, helped propel the bibliographers, the bibliophiles, the editors, and the biographers into motion. Melville’s name began to get around. The Bulletin of the Brooklyn Public Library provided catalogues of Melville and Thomas Dunn English late in 1919. Bibliographers added to each others’ lists and argued about omitted works.9 Meade Minnigerode began assembling a group of Melville letters and a list of his first editions, as well as noting differences between the original and revised editions of Typee.10 In 1920 new editions of Typee and Moby-Dick appeared; the latter, with an introduction by Viola Meynell, was the first American novel included in the important Oxford World’s Classics series. Everyman’s Library also reissued its editions of Typee, Omoo, and Moby-Dick. Two years later Oxford and Princeton University presses followed up with separate collections of reasonably obscure Melville sketches and poems.11
Perhaps most important, late in the spring of 1919 Carl Van Doren, an established professor at Columbia University, proposed to one of the English department’s instructors, Raymond Weaver, that he prepare a brief centennial account of Melville for The Nation, of which Van Doren was literary editor. “He was a wonderful old boy,” Van Doren said, “and I’d like to do him myself. But if you’d try him, I’m willing.” The invitation led the rather unsuspecting Weaver into the research that would, at the end of 1921, produce the first book on Melville, and a few years thereafter, the Constable edition of Melville’s works. To anyone familiar with the reawakening of interest in nineteenth-century American women writers during the last two decades, the pattern is clear enough: locating the books, putting out bibliographies, publishing editions, talking about your finds—all help produce a kind of material base upon which a structure of serious criticism can be erected.

Melville criticism took as its point of departure the South Seas connection. As the Literary Digest commented, Melville “has come back to us on the tidal wave raised by the South Sea books of Frederick O’Brien, the art furor over Gauguin, and all the smaller writers and painters who hurry to adopt a new fashion.” Indeed, Brander Matthews’s New York Times review of the Weaver biography and the Everyman reprints was titled “Teller of Sea Tales.” And Melville is prominently featured in an elaborate spread on “The Men That Found the South Seas” in The Mentor. The story is headed with a Frederick O’Brien photograph called “Samoan Girl and Her Natural Mirror,” the character of which one can easily imagine. Melville’s portrait appears on the first text page; the caption describes him as “Friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose books first acquainted Americans with the South Seas. He is yearly gaining recognition as one of the foremost literary men America has produced.” Appropriately, the summary of articles on the Melville centenary in Current Opinion was followed by a piece on “Aboriginal Art in the Pan-American Garden.” No one was better aware of the commercial potential of the South Seas connection than Weaver’s publisher, George H. Doran. In their publicity organ, Literary News Notes, for 14 December 1921, they say of Weaver’s work that “he has been able to reveal for the first time the life of the man who is really the father of South Sea literature.” And later, “he introduces the Creator of South Sea Fiction in This Romantic Record.” In their issue for 11 January 1992, they ask rhetorically, “Who Started the South Sea Craze?” and, of course, answer with Melville.

As is well known, this passion, not just for the South Pacific but for all
supposedly primitive places and peoples, persisted throughout much of the twenties. Artists sought the vivid colors and striking forms of aboriginal life. Museums displayed primal African artifacts. Ordinary people wished to escape the pressures of "civilization" by imaginary, and sometimes real, visits to exotic spots like Nuku Hiva . . . or Harlem. "The number of people is not small," pronounced a New York Times editorial, "who, with the choice of being translated to the unknown land of their desire, would pronounce for Tahiti."20 And, observing Melville's centenary, the Boston Herald celebrated rather more his four "happiest months . . . among a people living close to nature, untroubled by social conventions, not advanced enough to know the meaning of money, and 'absolutely free from cares, griefs, troubles or vexations.'"21

Elaborate theories have been spun to explain the attractiveness of "primitive" cultures to white "civilization"—which is how the discussion was then structured. My concern is not with this phenomenon as such but with the role in it constructed for "Marquesan" Melville, as one newspaper called him at the time of his death.22 That role develops not simply because Melville wrote about "primitive" places but because he could be appropriated to the needs of America's cultural elite to model a correct relationship to the "primitive." Almost all early twentieth-century accounts of Melville begin by mentioning that he came from "the best American stock, English, Scotch-Irish and Dutch."23 In fact, no word appears more often in these biographical essays than the racially-freighted term "stock." Weaver characterizes Melville's origins more fully in these terms: "Well-born, and nurtured in good manners and a cosmopolitan tradition, he was like George Borrow and Sir Richard Burton, a gentleman adventurer in the barbarous outposts of human experience."24 The Literary Digest had gone further. Complaining in an article devoted to Melville of the "contempt . . . for our older literature," which had become "one of the notes of our modern life," the Digest wrote: "To this our younger school of writers with names that suggest much more recent ships than the Mayflower are the chief contributors. They would have us forget altogether our literary heritage and concentrate on Chicago as a center of all that is worth conserving. Even our academic research, which must embrace more than the present to give the tone of scholarship, is frightened away from our literary past and forages in the well-cropped fields of foreign letters."25 Study of New England's Herman Melville, the Literary Digest suggests, would prove an antidote to this disease; thus
the value of Melville as an exemplar of "our literary heritage" is linked, in a fashion become customary among conservative critics, to the traditional values signified by the "Mayflower." A preference for Melville emerges as a defense against the immigrant ship, the "Hog Butcher for the World," polyglot culture, the dangerous fodder of foreign fields.

Carl Van Doren takes a further step in defining the importance of Melville to a time troubled—and intrigued—by the darker and "primitive" peoples of the world. In *The American Novel* he characterizes Melville as "thoroughly sensitive to the felicities of the exotic life." However, he continues, Melville "never loses himself in it entirely as did later men, like Lafcadio Hearn and Pierre Loti, but remains always the shrewd and smiling Yankee." Or, as another of Melville's partisans put it: "he had no particular desire to become decivilized. His stay in the Valley of Typee was in the nature of exile and he took the first opportunity to get among his own kind. To his credit also it should be said that he never, in after life, sentimentalized over the joys of barbarism. . . . [I]n the earlier narratives the happy riot of untrammelled folk among the cocoa palms and bread-fruit trees of the Pacific archipelagoes symbolize to him a triumph over the tribulations and complexities which beset civilized races." In other words, neither Melville himself, nor his narrators—nor, properly instructed, his readers—are about to abandon "civilization" for the South Seas, assuming that option were still truly available. Even Gauguin's sojourn might be too extended. To taste of the primitive, to make art of the primitive, to consume the primitive is one thing—quite another to lose oneself among "irresponsible natives hovering between cannibalism and a half-comprehended Christianity" (the language is Van Doren's). One might appropriate the freer rhythms of primitive culture, its sexual immediacy, its exotic sounds, just as one might visit the Cotton Club, but a well-born gentleman will guide us with Yankee shrewdness through such alien scenes. In short, Melville comes to be seen as evincing the correct relationship of a true American artist to "primitive" life and peoples precisely at a time in which the United States is developing its career of imperial expansion among the darker people of the world and thus is deeply in need of an appropriate ideology. And at a time, too, when white American artists, from Carl Van Vechten to George Gershwin, are trying to discover the means for assimilating the domestically exotic into their work. Ironically, what twenties critics discovered in Melville was not the democratic, much less homoerotic, "squeeze of the hand,"
the bonding of Ishmael with Queequeg, but the presumed distance that Herman Melville, of good New England stock, placed between himself and the felicities of "primitive" life.

Initially, then, Melville is constructed as the shrewd Yankee gentleman guiding us through dangerous—if seductive—encounters with "the primitive"; soon, however, in a variant of this bipolar structure of cultural authority, he emerges as the exemplary artist, masculine and compelling, posed against a dull, feminized Philistine herd. Indeed, Melville's major role for 1920s (and 1930s) critics is the artist as hero, standing apart from, in fact above, his society. The contrast between Melville's genius and the earlier lack of appreciation comes to stand more generally for the plight of artists in crass materialistic societies, like those of America in the 1850s and 1920s. Modernist mythology enshrined this view of the relationship between artists and their society, glorifying phrases like Joyce's "silence, exile, and cunning." "The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace," Pound had written in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)"

The "age demanded" chiefly a mould in plaster,
Made with no loss of time,
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
Or the "sculpture" of rhyme.

In this degraded environment, Melville emerges as "the blinded Samson set to grind chaff for the Philistine," 28 "a jungle lion chained by the leg, burning out his soul in rage, powerless save for his roar," 29 and thus a figure of even more heroic proportions than his own extraordinary characters. Weaver's biography was undoubtedly the primary force in establishing as critical gospel this drama of the sensitive artist whose "warring and untamed desires were in violent conflict with his physical and spiritual environments." He cites both Freud and Plato to refute the charge that Melville's supposed "decline" was attributable to insanity:

"From insanity," said Plato, "Greece has derived its greatest benefits." But the dull and decent Philistine, untouched by Platonic heresies, justifies his sterility in a boast of sanity. The America in which Melville was born and died was exuberantly and unquestionably "sane." Its "sanity" drove Irving abroad and made a recluse of Hawthorne.
Melville Climbs the Canon

Cooper threw upon it. And of Melville, more ponderous in gifts and more volcanic in energy than any other American writer, it made an Ishmael upon the face of the earth. With its outstanding symptoms of materialism and conformity it drove Emerson to pray for an epidemic of madness. . . . From this it would appear that a taste for insanity has been widespread among poets, prophets and saints: men venerated more by posterity than by their neighbors. . . . The herd must always be intolerant of all who violate its sacred and painfully reared traditions. . . . Openly to harbor convictions repugnant to the herd is still the most unforgivable sin against that most holy of ghosts—fashionable opinion. . . . Melville sinned blackly against the orthodoxy of his time.30

By the easy transition of shifting verb tense, Weaver links Melville's time to his own; Melville's career thus becomes a contemporary archetype of the "poets, prophets and saints" betrayed by a callous or indifferent mob. Moreover, among those "men venerated" by posterity, poets emerge as foremost; Melville's new disciples, then, implicitly become the interpreters of a modernist secular writ, Platos refashioning the strangeness of modern art as true sanity in a "dull and decent" bourgeois world.

The drama constructed by Weaver became the commonplace of Melville scholarship. "It is not difficult," the Times Literary Supplement reviewer of Weaver's book writes of Typee, "to see why it was so bitterly assailed in the Puritan New England of 1846. It ran atilt at every convention: the picture of Fayaway using her only garment as a sail and, more terrible still, the profligate suggestion that women look their best while smoking were more than enough to shock the conscience of the early Victorians."31 No Melville quotation emerged as more popular than that from one of his letters (1 June 1851?) to Hawthorne: "Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. . . . What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches."32 In time, other quotations from Melville family members came to the surface as evidence to support this portrait. For example, there is Elizabeth Melville's remark in 1859: "Herman has taken to writing poetry. You need not tell any one, for you know how such things get around."33 This romantic myth of the artist defeated by society persists right through the 1920s. Thus, Lewis Mumford concludes his 1929 biography with this peroration, interesting for
the underlying masculine sexual metaphor and for the romantic picture of the artist as visionary, both characteristic of 1920s criticism:

Whatever Melville's life was, his art in *Moby-Dick* exhibits that integration and synthesis which we seek. Through his art, he escaped the barren destiny of his living: he embraced Life; and we who now follow where his lonely courage led him embrace it, too. This embrace was a fertile one; and in each generation it will bring forth its own progeny. The day of Herman Melville's vision is now in the beginning. It hangs like a cloud over the horizon at dawn; and as the sun rises, it will become more radiant, and more a part of the living day.34

Mumford's fundamental scenario differs from Weaver's only in that he differentiates the provincialism of antebellum America from the crass materialism of the Gilded Age and significantly modifies Weaver's notion that Melville's capacities as a writer declined seriously after *Moby-Dick*.

In fact, this romantic construction of Melville as thwarted artist became pervasive. In one of the first scholarly articles on him, written in 1928, Horace Scudder discusses the textual origins of "Benito Cereno" and interprets its final conversation between the gloomy Don Benito and the American Captain, Amasa Delano. That dialogue, as readers will recall, includes this famous exchange:

"You are saved, Don Benito," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?"
"The Negro."

There was silence, while the moody man sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall.

There was no more conversation that day.

Scudder's take on this conversation typifies much Melville criticism even unto our own time: "This dialogue which darkens the whole tale is the voice of Melville himself crying out against the injustice which has been done him, charging his critics with a misrepresentation which had brought his work to a premature close, and ruined his life. . . . Melville himself is Benito Cereno, and Babo is the personification of malicious criticism."35

The construction of Melville as spurned artist and prophet overwhelms all other ways of thinking about his texts. Scudder's interpretation of "Benito Cereno," altogether typical of his time, suggests, in fact, a certain need among upper-middle-class white intellectuals of the day to ignore
the racial texts which open before them in this story, or in Melville's works generally. This need should not be surprising given the ways in which 1920s critics used Melville to mark "civilization" off from "savagey." Not the least of the ironies in this situation—one Melville might himself have enjoyed—is how Captain Delano, in all his racial blindness and condescension, continues to be the appropriate model of Melville's modernist champions. For them, as for Delano, the roots of the story remain mysterious; as Henry Seidel Canby writes, "Benito Cereno" is a "mystery in which the impending weight of a barbarous black power gradually comes to realization."36 This observation is as close to a recognition of the story's racial content as critics come until 1936, when Arthur Hobson Quinn, an older and somewhat traditional scholar, writes that

The test of such a story is the effect upon the reader, of course, and so real is the atmosphere Melville creates that each time Delano sends his boat back to his own ship without him we feel a strong desire, as though he were living, to warn him to go with it. It is the picture of one man, of our own race, alone amid the hostile strangers who are waiting to strike, that appeals so strongly. . . . Benito and Delano are both surrounded by human beings whose only hope of freedom lies in mutiny and murder.37

But for most other critics both of the 1920s and 1930s, regardless of their politics, Melville's dramatization of American racism remains altogether hidden behind their construction of Melville's biography as an archetype of the limits and frustrations of their own class position.

Rarely are the grounds of this portrait of Melville as "prophet betrayed" brought into question. Vernon Louis Parrington emphasizes Melville's democratic outlook, even in Pierre,38 but this perception is not widely-shared even, perhaps surprisingly, among progressive critics of the thirties like Granville Hicks. Most sharply, perhaps, the anonymous reviewer of Weaver's biography for the Catholic World excoriates both his failure to account for Melville as "a religious man" and for his view of humanity as "the herd." "The white whale," the reviewer argues, "is the heart of humanity. . . . He who loves not humankind and the heart of humankind, wicked, faithless, ungrateful, treacherous as it is—he who turns upon it in disdainful hate—will be destroyed by it."39 Thus the reviewer, speaking from a traditional religious position, attacks Weaver's myth as at once supercilious and sacrilegious.

But such views are rarely articulated. The appeal of the myth of the
misunderstood, exiled artist to modernist intellectuals, however differ-
ently articulated in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man or “Hugh Selwyn
Mauberley,” in The Education of Henry Adams or “The Waste Land,” can
hardly be exaggerated. The myth had enormous explanatory—and con-
solatory—power for members of a class whose status had been brought
into question and whose authority had seemed to be eroding. It set at
immediate discount the complaints about the difficulties of modern art:
not to understand it marked you as Philistine, rather than the artist as
obscurantist. It elevated writers to positions of moral primacy and their
priests, the critics and professors, to cultural dominion.

Embodied in Melville, moreover, this myth took a particularly potent
shape. E. H. Eby insists in a review of one of the new editions of Pierre
that “this destruction of certainties alienated Melville from his genera-
just as it brought him close to the moderns.”40 One such modern was
Archibald MacLeish; reviewing Lewis Mumford’s biography of Melville,
he dramatizes the conflict between the mass and the modernist:

In our time one world is broken, has been broken for a hundred years.
Another is building, has been built to the eye-height of the great ma-
jority of men so that they believe their heads are covered, or will soon
be covered—Science will know it all soon: it will soon be known. A
few, and those the men most characteristic of our time, are still un-
housed. . . . [A]ll of them are naked to the air, and to these men,
like a written stone on the promontories of an uninhabitable land, the
voice of Melville comes with almost unendurable meaning. The knowl-
dge of evil in the world. The stumbling malice. The brute chance.
They, too, have known it and spoken and been spat upon by the new-
roofed fellows with their plaster facts and their watts and kilos and
their safe, sure incomes from their six percents. The cosmopolitan,
Semitic pseudo-Gallicized, ironical, sophisticated, giggling spirit of our
time knows nothing of that terror and shrieks with spiteful laughter
when the words are said.41

Melville could thus be deployed against those twin—and perhaps, as
Andreas Huyssen suggests,42 fundamentally identical—enemies of high
modernism: the (giggling) feminine and the (Semitic) mob. Around Mel-
villa, men—Anglo-Saxon, poetic, prophetic, critics and intellectuals—
could bond in true masculine style.

No one presents this conception of Melville so starkly as Fred Lewis
Pattee, perhaps the very first professor of American literature. He por-
trays Melville as a thundering naysayer, Byronic, Nietzschean, displaying his "contempt for the herd," his characters "supermen who flaunt their defiance even in the face of the Almighty." This heroic being he poses against "the feminine fifties with their 'Wide Wide World,' their 'Lamplighter,' their 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'" The modernist battle against gentility and the popular, against mass culture and the feminine, is thus provided with historical precedent and mythological incarnation. And the study of American literature, so constructed, becomes an ideological vehicle to pursue the modernist project of separating art that is true—read masculine, autonomous, experimental—from art that is false—read feminine, referential, traditional. Pattee's reading of Melville, with its barely suppressed misogyny and triumphal elitism, is after all offered in a book concerned with, to quote its title, The New American Literature, 1890–1930.

Interestingly, Leftist critics of the 1930s accept this fundamental drama of Melville in combat with his world, but see it as representing not the triumph of the artist but his flaw. Both Granville Hicks and V. F. Calverton, for example, present Melville (quite briefly) as heroic but failed. Hicks insists that Melville could not find ways to come to terms with the evil embodied in the "concrete economic phenomena" with which men were "wrestling" after the Civil War. Calverton claims that Melville could only turn and flee from the "industrialism of the east" and the "commercial cunning of his own land." Calverton writes: "The more serious, the more significant task of changing that civilization, staying with it to transform it, did not inspire him. Like Thoreau, he preferred to desert it, to build his fantasies where he could be free of it. All his novels, including his masterpiece Moby-Dick, in which, in symbolic form, our whole capitalist society was indicted, advanced no further in its solution." But these represent minority views, even during the "progressive" thirties. In any case, they reinforce the basic drama of the great artist posed against his society.

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In time, the dominant critical position became not to test Melville's values or his prose against traditional standards of merit but to test a reader's worthiness by his or her responses to Melville. Melville's difficulties appear not as problems to be overcome but as virtues which place him in the camp of modernist poets. Most earlier enthusiasts had assumed that "to love Melville was to join a very small circle. It was like eating hasheesh."
To be sure, an interest in Melville marked one as "extraordinary . . . for no ordinary person loves Melville." But that was hardly matter for remark for those bred to such comfortable distinctions. Culture, after all, came of class. But by the end of 1921, Carl Van Vechten would begin his aggressive review of Weaver's biography by quoting a passage from H. S. Salt's unusual 1892 article on Melville:

"Has America a literature? I am inclined to think it a grave mistake to argue seriously with those afflicted persons who periodically exercise themselves over this idlest of questions. It is wiser to meet them with a practical counterthrust, and pointedly inquire, for example, whether they are familiar with the writings of Herman Melville. Whereupon confusion will, in most cases, ensue, and you will go on to suggest that to criticise 'Hamlet' with the prince's part omitted would be no whit more fatuous than to demonstrate the nonexistence of an American literature, while taking no account of its true intellectual giant."  

Not to know Melville, here, "argues yourself unknown." A couple of months earlier, H. M. Tomlinson had posed "Moby Dick" as "a supreme test. If it captures you, then you are unafraid of great art. You may dwell in safety with fiends or angels and rest poised with a quiet mind between the stars and the bottomless pit." A taste for Melville, which had been the emblem of a gentlemanly coterie on "both sides of the seas," has now become the index to a reader's poetic sensibilities, a token of admission to the precincts of modern intellectual respectability. This should be no surprise, for the pleasure of the modernist text is in many ways the pleasure of initiation, of separation from the ordinary, of difference insisted upon.

The alteration in evaluations of Melville as an artist during the first decades of the twentieth century registers fundamental changes in three factors crucial to the construction of his image: audience, style, and which texts drew the critical eye. In her 1894 primer on American Literature, Mildred Cabell Watkins expressed directly a widely-held view of Melville's audience: "Four wildly exciting tales of adventure might be named here; they are of just the kind to please the boys. They are Typee, Omoo, White Jacket, and Moby Dick, or the White Whale, all by Herman Melville." Similarly, in its 1919 centennial article on Moby-Dick, the New York Tribune suggested that the book "has been read all these years by that thin but unending line of boys and men to whom the sea is home and heaven, and the one great adventure, whether seen and known or only
dreamed of and imagined.” Summarizing *Moby-Dick*, the *New York Evening Post* asserted that “no boy, no matter how grown up, ever tired of this. By way of compensation to oldsters, the book is full of that philosophy which makes Melville unique among sea writers.” The implication of the *Evening Post’s* editorial, that at some level *Moby-Dick* always remains a boys’ book, underlies Percy Boynton’s account of Melville: “Two thirds of the chapters,” he writes, “might be culled to present this relentless sequence in the form of a so-called boys’ book. Yet even so presented the story would contain more than meets the eye.” Without being derogatory, I want to suggest that much of Melville’s appeal, especially in the critical period during which he was being established as a “classic” writer, has precisely to do with the validation of boys’ tastes in mens’ criticisms. I suspect that this continues to be true, for what is more powerful than the confirmation of youthful enthusiasm in the language of mature reflection?

There is, obviously, a kicker here. Mildred Cabell Watkins knew whereof she spoke: to the extent that they appeal to adolescents, Melville’s earlier works do speak almost exclusively to boys. Girls seldom, indeed, take a place in the *Tribune*’s “thin but unending line” of seaward-young youth. But that masculinity was precisely part of Melville’s appeal to twenties critics. As I have argued elsewhere, and as many of the quotations I have used suggest in image and word, nothing was more important to that post-war generation of literary intellectuals than masculinizing American culture. And surely their boyhood enthusiasm helped fill that bill. As Frank Jewett Mather put it, “Out of his [Melville’s] loins grows the recent ‘strong school.’ They have nothing in common with him but his emphasis.” Nothing, perhaps, except that which Mather goes on immediately to call his “witchery of words.”

The critical views of Melville as artist changed nowhere so fully as in the accounts of his language, his imagery, his style: at the beginning of his revival Melville is valued despite his mannered style; by the end of a decade, his value lay precisely in the appeal of his style to a modernist reader. To be sure, some early critics, notably Archibald MacMechan, praised Melville’s style, at least in *Moby-Dick*, as “distinctly American.” But the conventional wisdom had it that “his style suffered a complete and disastrous change from the directness of *Typee* and *Omoo*.” One of the more senior professors at Columbia interested in American literature, William P. Trent, thought *Moby-Dick’s* “inordinate length, its frequently inartistic heaping up of details, and its obvious imitation of
Carlylean tricks of style and construction” limited the value even of Melville’s “masterpiece.”57 But it was precisely in Melville’s irregularities and difficulties of style that the newer generation of critics, like Carl Van Doren and Van Wyck Brooks, took pleasure. “The style” of Moby-Dick, Van Doren wrote, “is mannered but felicitous, warm, insinuating, pictorial, allusive, and witty.”58 Still, in the early twenties Van Doren continued to accept the judgment that Pierre is “hopelessly frantic” and the later novels and tales “not markedly original.” Brooks claims Melville as a “word-master” and celebrates precisely those qualities which Trent had deplored: “If Melville’s learned loquacity takes one back three hundred years, so does his use of language. He can carry an apostrophe to the length of a page, and his words have the strong natural flavour of Shakespeare’s prose, or of Southdown mutton.”59 Shakespeare, Dekker, Webster, Carlyle, Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Burton, Smollett, Rabelais—of such were constructed the touchstones to validate Melville’s mature style. Increasingly, thus, Melville comes to be seen not as a transparently approachable chronicler of sea tales, but as a densely allusive composer whose most precious treasures would be yielded up, as with other modernist texts, only to learned initiates.

In fact, by the late 1920s Melville’s style is being portrayed as exactlying “poetic.” In 1927 Percy Boynton prints a passage from Pierre in verse form.60 The following year, John Erskine presents Moby-Dick as a kind of symboliste “prose poem”: “when we say that this story is a poem rather than a novel, we mean that its art consists not in reproducing pictures of the outside of life, such as we can call faithful, but rather in preparing our minds for an effect of emotion, so that at the end there will be a powerful catharsis, or release of feeling. . . . No detail is lost in the ultimate effect.”61 By the following year, the characterization of Melville’s prose as “poetic” has become a critical commonplace, endlessly recycled in reviews of Lewis Mumford’s biography.62 Thus Melville’s books emerge from the twenties garbed in the metaphysical designs valorized by his modernist and academic champions.

Still, for murkier later texts like Pierre, critics began to turn toward an even more powerful domestic analogy: Henry James. Early in the reassessment of Melville, Arthur Johnson, who saw the enormous influence of James on the work of the “Younger Generation,” imagines what he doubts can ever be established: that in his boyhood James might have been “irresistibly attracted by things in stray Melville volumes he chanced to espay standing dusty on the shelves of libraries he was brought
up among.” The Melville strays Johnson evokes are, interestingly, “Bartleby,” “Benito Cereno,” and ultimately *Pierre*. The issue for Johnson is not plot or theme—“advanced,” he says, even for today—but rather “sentences,” that is, style. And he quotes two long columns from the then out-of-print *Pierre* to illustrate how “their thoroughness . . . involved devices and idiosyncrasies grotesquely alike,” and how “their methods of presentation . . . may appear rather to tally.” 63 What Johnson is about here, I think, is drawing to the support of Melville, and especially his disregarded later works, the increasing critical prestige of James. At the same time, he is offering Melville as an older historical precedent for the modernist obsession with the more complex formal qualities of art. That paragon of the avant-garde, Carl Van Vechten, takes this process one step further a few years later. “I think it highly probable,” he insists, “that the day may come when there will be those who will prefer the later Melville just as there are those who prefer the later James, those who will care more for the metaphysical, and at the same time more self-revealing works, than for the less subtle and more straightforward tales.” 64

Van Vechten did, in fact, call the turn. By the end of the decade, it is *Pierre* which is being reprinted in more than one new edition and is being widely discussed by critics indifferent to South Seas adventures but attuned to the new insights of Freudian psychology 65 and to how *Pierre* can be seen to enact yet another version of the artist’s struggle against the feminized conventional. Weaver, irrelevantly but tellingly, uses the opportunity of introducing Melville’s shorter novels to develop precisely such a reading of *Pierre*. 66

I think my students’ distaste for Melville needs to be understood in this context. For them, the modernist preference for difficult, indeed obscure, texts is no virtue; it may, in fact, reflect a process deeply inflected by class standards, whose effect is to marginalize them culturally. Moreover, the high modernism of the 1920s has until recently—and still in secondary schools—shaped literary study in the United States, embodying through the New Criticism the theory and practice of writers like Eliot and Pound—and, thanks to many of those who promoted him seventy years ago, Melville as well. However my students might position themselves with respect to “Yankees” and “Redskins,” masculine individual artists and feminized “others,” few if any perceive virtue in obscurity of subject or density of style. My point here is not to validate my students’ tastes but to understand them as shedding light on the way Melville was constructed as an icon of modernist values in the 1920s and thus as an
icon of an academic reading community toward which my undergraduates feel deep suspicion.

The shifts in critical attention during the 1920s are suggestive not only of how Melville was used during that time but also of the workings of academic culture since. The movement from Typee and Omoo, the dominant texts (and the only ones steadily in print) prior to the First World War, through Moby-Dick, the book discussed by almost every critic in the early twenties, and to Pierre illustrates one of the points Jane Tompkins has made about Hawthorne in Sensational Designs. Over the years, he remained a "classic" author, but many of the texts on which that judgment was based changed with changing conceptions of literary value and the changing needs of literary intellectuals. So it happened, in a more compressed time frame, with Melville.

Challenges to established cultural values, as the modernist attacks on the genteel tradition suggest, often involve a process by which the authority of certain institutions declines while that of others rises. Melville's initial usefulness to the modernist project of the 1920s involved the roles constructed for him within the cultural contests I have been sketching: gentlemanly guide through the primitive, misunderstood heroic genius, modernist poet and icon. Essentially in one decade, he was transformed from the treasure of a small coterie of gentlemen into a form of cultural capital deployed by the advanced writers, critics and professors and their disciples, who were exerting ever more cultural authority in the post-World War I period. He became important in their struggle against alternative sources of social power, whether these were defined as the exotic, the herd, or the genteel. As is perhaps always the case, what the critics of the 1920s made of Melville tells us more about them than about him. By the same token, the persistence of Melville as an academic cultural icon, however much our own tastes and our readings of him have altered, also tells us something about the nature of the academy in twentieth-century American life. Once Melville, by the processes I have been describing, began to achieve classic or canonical status, it has been far easier to reconstitute his values (or meaning) than his value (or canonicity). Tracking that process—how and why Melville has remained atop the academic canon—is yet another paper.

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Notes

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4 Congressional Record, 10 December 1921, 177.


10 Meade Minnigerode, Some Personal Letters of Herman Melville and a Bibliography (New York: Brick Row Book Shop, 1922).


12 Quoted from Weaver's account in Raymond Weaver Papers, Special Manuscript Collections, Columbia University. In significant ways, Van Doren represents the kind of masculine academic intellectual who brought Melville to prominence during the 1920s. He held an academic appointment, taught, and carried out academic research. But he also wrote for a general public, not only in the pages of The Nation and other periodicals but also in his books, which were clearly directed to a general literate audience.

13 Raymond M. Weaver, Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic (New York: George H. Doran, 1921).


*The Mentor*: 18.

*Current Opinion* 67 (September 1919): 186.

Copies in Raymond Weaver Papers. Weaver himself had evidently clipped reviews of Frederick O'Brien's *White Shadows in the South Seas* and Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, both published the previous year.

*New York Times*, 10 October 1920, summarizing an article by Paul Gooding in the October 1920 *National Geographic*.

"Today's Centenary of Herman Melville," *Boston Herald*, 1 August 1919.

*New York World*, 11 October 1891.

Matthews: 5. Matthews had used similar phrases in his earlier work.

Raymond Weaver, "Herman Melville," *The Bookman* 54 (December 1921): 318. The magazine was issued by Weaver's publisher and this article was clearly designed to whet readers' appetites for the biography about to appear.


Holbrook Jackson, "Herman Melville," *Anglo-French Review* 2 (August 1919): 63. Something of this view persists even in F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford, 1941). Commenting on the remark "I am myself a savage," Matthiessen writes: "But there were many senses in which Melville was not. Of the same racial mixture as Whitman, English on his father's side, Dutch on his mother's, his ancestors had risen far above the Whitmans' plebian class" (374).

The phrase is that of F. L. Lucas, "Herman Melville," in *Authors Dead and Living* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 109 (this piece is actually a reprint of a 1922 review of Weaver's biography).


Weaver, "Herman Melville": 320–21.


Quoted in Jay Leyda, ed. *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 412. Only one of the writers who cites this passage bothers to point out that when it was written Melville was in fact completing *Moby-Dick*.

Quoted in Lucas, 110.


Horace Scudder, "Melville's *Cereno* and Captain Delano's Voyages," *PMLA* 43 (1928): 531. "Benito Cereno" was reprinted in 1927 by the None-such Press in a particularly handsome illustrated edition. Reviewers discuss,

40 American Literature 2 (1930): 321. See also Grant C. Knight, “The Literature of Romanticism,” in American Literature and Culture (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1932): “The large claims made for him now arise in some part from the demands of post-war disillusionment which found in Melville a similar revulsion from platitudes, from the acceptance of things as they are. His tone pleases well the dismayed ‘intelligent minority’ of the 1920s and 1930s” (221).
43 Pattee, 373, 379, 378, 381. The Melville chapter is virtually identical to an essay Pattee had earlier published in American Mercury (10 [January 1927]: 33–43).
49 Mildred Cabell Watkins, American Literature (New York: American Book Company, 1894), 47. The book is designed to tell “the story of American literature . . . for the benefit of young Americans” (3).
50 “Moby Dick’ and the Years to Come,” New York Tribune, 4 August 1919.
55 Archibald MacMechan, “The Best Sea Story Ever Written,” in *The Life of a Little College* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914). The article was originally published in 1899. MacMechan goes on: “It is large in idea, expansive; it has an Elizabethan force and freshness and swing, and is, perhaps, more rich in figures than any style but Emerson’s. It has the picturesque ness of the New World, and, above all, a free-flowing humour, which is the distinct cachet of American literature” (190).
58 Van Doren, 74. He goes on to say that if it is “too irregular, too bizarre . . . ever to win the most popular suffrage, the immense originality of *Moby Dick* must warrant the claim of its admirers that it belongs with the greatest sea romances in the whole literature of the world.”
65 See, for example, “Herman Melville’s ‘Pierre,’” *Times Literary Supplement* 500 (30 October 1930): 884.
66 Raymond Weaver, introduction to *The Shorter Novels of Herman Melville* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), vii–li.