

SUMMARY

Metaphors of Ideology and Figures in the Text: Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, and American Literary Studies

The main theme of the book is the phenomenon of persistent and recurrent revivals of attention – coming from different angles and taking different forms – bestowed on Herman Melville’s canonical novel *Moby-Dick* (1851). It is not a critical exaggeration to claim that since the beginning of systematic and institutionalized study of American literature in the first half of the 20th century each new generation of American Studies scholars has reconstituted the novel as a key text of their discipline but that each has done so for different reasons every time: the first professional readers as a symbol of the coming-of-age of American literature and culture in a self-conscious comparison to and competition with European culture; then as a symbolic performance of many essential cultural and psychological conflicts faced internally and externally by American society; next as a text/work which plays a vital role in emancipating critical and political discourse, and, lately, as an illustration of new philosophical, intellectual, social tendencies – from ecocriticism, new materialism, posthumanism to new formalism. Considering the course of the novel’s recognition and appraisal beginning in the early 20th century, it could be argued that it was precisely due to its belated recognition beyond the context of its immediate production and reception that the novel has become a metaphor for various epistemological shifts in American literary studies which was constituted as a full-fledged discipline by the first half of the 20th century. It is therefore the case that the course of the novel’s reception offers an overview and a reminder of the development of American literary studies and their branching off in the last quarter of the 20th and early 21st century extending to our time marking the scope of the study. Each chapter thus looks at different institutional and epistemological preconditions for the renewed critical reappraisals of the novel within the discipline. The continued critical and readerly fascination with Melville’s novel is consid-

ered in the context of Lawrence Buell's explication of the "Great American Novel" (GAN) model.

In order to look at the state of the art of American literary studies of the latter 20th and early 21st century through the prism of Melville and his grand novel, we should first acknowledge the early attempts at Melville's recognition gaining momentum in the 1920s during the height of modernist poetics shaping both literature and criticism and promulgated by the first generation of Melville scholars such as Raymond Weaver, Lewis Mumford, Carl Van Doren, Van Wyck Brooks, and Eleanor Melville Metcalf. Crucially, these critics emphasized Melville's modernity as an American writer and used this insight to launch an argument going for the independent study of American literature. They thus modernized Melville and his novel in particular and exempted the text from both the context of its production and the field of its reception in nineteenth-century America.

They were followed up in the 1940s and 1950s by another mighty wave of literary critics and historians taking upon themselves the goal of founding and institutionally grounding American studies by the likes of F. O. Matthiessen, Richard Chase, R. W. B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, Charles Feidelson, and Charles Olson, when it comes to Melville particularly. Most of them are based in the fold of New Criticism allowing for readings of *Moby-Dick* which were focused on its literary merit; stylistic, linguistic and thematic peculiarities; irony, complexity and ambiguity in the text. Their observations take place within critical models of, respectively, Matthiessen's "American Renaissance," Chase's "American romance," Lewis's "the American Adam," and Feidelson's symbolism, all of which could be subsumed under the heading of the Myth and Symbol school of American studies. It is particularly Matthiessen's critical model that is elaborated as a foundational move for American studies. These developments were further fostered by the rise of the myth and archetype and psychoanalytic criticism taking off in the 1950s and consolidating in the 1960s in the works of Northrop Frye, Leslie Fiedler, and Leo Marx, among others, focusing on the abstract mythic content and largely disregarding broader social and historical affordances of literature. Melville's novel also drew some outlying perspectives, of which C. L. R. James's will be cited as an example.

The separation of the social from the literary began to break down in the 1960s and 1970s due to the emergence of various social and political

movements while in the sphere of literary and cultural studies poststructuralism and particularly deconstruction held their sway, and occasioned yet another shift in the reading of Melville's status and his novel. This inherent mistrust in the prior "national imaginaries" (Buell) is reflected in the attempts to revise the canon or reconsider the features sustaining the canonical status of literary works, Melville's included. These revisions and reconsideration, first manifested in the work of Sacvan Bercovitch as an exemplary transitional critical figure, are further compounded in the 1980s and beyond by an increasing attention given to the cultural and social context of nineteenth-century America such as could be derived and reconstructed from textual traces as manifested by New Historicism and cultural studies and finding expression in the works of David Reynolds, Lawrence Buell, Jonathan Arac, Michael Gilmore, Richard Brodhead, Eric Sundquist, Donald Pease, and Wai Chee Dimock with emphasis on their readings of Melville. They take it upon themselves not only to reconstruct the historical worlds of the text and its multiple readings within the model of hegemony and its subversion, but also to critically examine the very process of consolidation of American literary studies by means of canonization. Richard Slotkin and Michael Paul Rogin join the fray from the field of historiography as they submit to criticism the key American myths and symbols previously glorified but now seen as ideological constructs (the conquest of the West, initiation in the wilderness, Indian as an archetypal antagonist, virgin land, a city on the hill, manifest destiny, Puritan exceptionalism). In the 1980s and 1990s the previous cohort was joined by a new generation of scholars promoting New Historicist perspectives and applying them to the understanding of American literature, and specifically to considering Melville's role in the literary and cultural system illustrating what Bercovitch terms, a time of dissensus.

The third chapter demonstrates how end-of-the-century poststructuralist and postmodernist reexamination affected the field of American literary history and questioned its premises of national insularism, language, representativeness, inclusion and exclusion, cultural hierarchy, identity questions, and ideological constructs employed in the writing of a national literary history. Even though the late 20th century and turn of the 21st century new Americanists have launched, and continue to do so, challenges to the entrenched critical and nationalist assumptions, still the

discussion shows how difficult it is to fully replace or discredit the extant methodologies or narratives of literary history in the discipline that continue to exert their heuristic, epistemological, and ideological role. It is thus the case that the once discredited term of “American renaissance”, under which the recognition of Melville began to consolidate within mid-20th century American studies, experiences its tentative comeback in the 21st century, while the idea of composing a coherent national narrative now competes with the various subnational and transnational perspectives.

In the fourth chapter the focus is on various strategies of self-fashioning and self-representation that Herman Melville, as a persona constituted by his numerous textual traces, undertook during his career. Building on the work of the “old” Americanists and their valuable insights ranging from Perry Miller to William Charvat, the argument follows the social and institutional affordances, Melville’s personal and family records and statements, and the cross-section of mid-nineteenth-century American culture and the shape of its literary market in order to outline a direction of Melville’s self-understanding and a degree of cultural adaptation that he combined in the creation of his works up to and following *Moby-Dick*. More recent cultural and historicist approaches highlight the idea of the hegemonic forces of culture, the writer’s willful or reluctant cohabitation with the culture’s demands, and rhetorical strategies in and outside of his texts to create a more independent space for the expression of his ideas as was Melville’s notion in *Moby-Dick*. The terms of discussion in this chapter stem from Wai Chee Dimock’s powerful depiction of America as an “empire for liberty,” taken from Thomas Jefferson, as an indication of the pull of inexorable cultural forces and the counterpull of individualism at work in mid-nineteenth-century American culture in which Melville developed as a writer.

The fifth chapter focuses on the late 20th century critical archive of Melville’s novel, still carrying the title for better or worse as “the imperial folio of American literature” (Dimock) reviewing the influence of various critical turns in the humanities, ranging from the linguistic turn, the cultural turn to the historical. Representative readings in a poststructuralist and deconstructivist vein point out the (inter)textual and intermedial nature of the novel, self-reflexivity of its narrative procedures, philosophical ambiguities refracted through semiotic theories and postmodernist phi-

losophy (Bryant, Brodhead, Buell). William Spanos particularly offers a strong reading model from a deconstructivist perspective placing Melville's text in the tradition of an anti-ontological strain of Western philosophy and as such strenuously critical of the American project and its founding myths (the jeremiad, the Emersonian tradition, Puritan vocationalism). The strong current of cultural and neo-historicist readings of the novel also persists in this period (Railton, Arac, Dimock). When looking at the continuity of psychoanalytic interest in the novel, the end-of-the-century procedures emphasize neo-Freudian and neo-Jungian and feminist perspectives, expanding into different identity approaches, especially those focusing on race and the racialized body (Leverenz, Paglia, Powell, Sten). The novel also partakes in the discourses of postcolonialism at this time (Otter).

Looking at the procession of these critical approaches, we notice the transition from the idea of American exceptionalism to the notion of skepticism by the end of the 20th century and into the new millennium, leading up to the present-day recognition of the end of American global hegemony. In the sixth chapter, thus, we outline the direction of most recent critical approaches to *Moby-Dick* as they tackle the notions of (language) philosophy, political economy and a politics of representation inextricably bound with the novel's complex vision (Casarino, Grgas, Evans, Baker, Frank, Morrisey, Downes, Greiman, Blum), ecocriticism and concurrently new materialism and posthumanism (Buell, Jonik, Nurmi, Levine, Dimock), and the onset of new formalism (Otter, Sanborn, Yothers, Calder). These new readings, which appear with unabated frequency testifying to the abiding interest in the novel, should be seen as a parallax, an oblique commentary not only on the novel but more so on the current state of affairs, providing unexpected and insightful views of the world we live in. Given that new critical material on Melville and all his works – *Moby-Dick* in particular – is proliferating, that new critical biographies of Melville are in the works, that digital textual editions of his works are meticulously being prepared drawing new generations of researchers to his work, it is safe to say that “the Melville text” (Bryant), a vast textual and intermedial archive about the author and his works, continues into the 21st century as a testimony of its major cultural significance not only for American studies and American literature but also for global literary studies.