Modernism

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A consideration of Herman Melville through the lens of modernism – the much discussed and debated period of cultural and artistic ferment that upended much of the settled artistic landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – can take one of two directions. It can lay out the ways in which Melville’s account of the rapidly changing world he occupied and chronicled, alongside his challenges to Victorian mores and aesthetic modes, anticipated the radical transformations in art and literature most characteristically deemed modernist. Alternately, the posthumous reception of Melville, and the influence his work exerted, can be taken as the beginning of a modernist genealogy that extends well beyond the nineteenth century, shaping many of the most pronounced voices that broke formal and aesthetic ground in the modernist upheavals after Melville’s death in 1891.

Modernist scholarship has moved in ways that allow for an account of Melville in both modes simultaneously. It has reached backward into the nineteenth century to study the beginnings of a “long modernism” that is seen not so much as a decisive point of rupture (Virginia Woolf’s claim that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” being one of the most cited of these) as a series of disruptions that led to more widespread aesthetic transformations. Transnational influences have also become more pronounced in modernist scholarship; while Melville’s ascension to the canon can best be understood as contemporaneous with the codification of American literature as a field of study, his impact was registered on both sides of the Atlantic, including among British modernist authors themselves – most importantly, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster.

As early as 1928 in the *New Republic*, Lewis Mumford, one of the key architects of the Melville revival of the 1920s, put to question these resonances of Melville as a modernist author:

Why does Herman Melville mean so much more to us than he did to his own contemporaries? What has his thought done for us, and what has his
vision given? The change that has come about is not merely a change of style, so that the things which amused [Melville's contemporary authors] are now old-fashioned, like hooped skirts, while the things that concerned Melville are, like the cubist quilts and coverlets of the 1850's, distinctly modern.

The answers to these questions are as various as the competing definitions of modernism. Mumford posits, in a somewhat gestural manner, "that tragic sense of life which has always attended the highest triumphs of the race, at the moments of completest mastery and fulfillment." Undoubtedly Melville's encyclopedic urge, and his rigorous recording of the failures of such totalities, appealed to modernists writing their own "cubist quilts" that fractured artistic norms. Melville's work might be deemed protomodernist in other crucial dimensions as well. His strident essay of 1850, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," lays out many of the aesthetic imperatives modernist social and literary revolutions would later echo. There he evinces a profound ambivalence about both the popular culture of his time and literary innovation more broadly: what might be taken as two of the crucial hallmarks of modernist literature tout court.

Melville's nominal review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* quickly becomes a manifesto for a reimagined American literature, and a statement of Melville's own artistic aspirations, one that sought distance from the literary conventions of its time while still relying innately on those established forms. Hawthorne is praised in terms that oscillate between sentimental attachment and profound rupture, at first revealing "a depth of tenderness, such a boundless love of sympathy with all forms of being, such an omnipresent love" - the same qualities that would suit Hawthorne's fiction for the gift books and literary annuals of his time - only to later extol "the hither side of Hawthorne's soul ... like the dark half of the physical sphere ... shrouded in blackness ten times black," the "dark Hawthorne" celebrated by twentieth-century critics.

Hawthorne, in Melville's account, is both a representative author and one who stands apart from his contemporaries, eliciting an agon between popularity and prestige that would become a hallmark of later modernist production. Hawthorne is termed "too deserving of popularity to be popular," only to be recovered by essay's end as worthy of being "sold by the hundred-thousand; and read by the million; and admired by everyone who is capable of admiration." The simultaneous aspirations for a coterie audience and popular recognition strate the essay, part and parcel of Melville's notion of literary originality as a decisive break from past
models that prefigures modernist calls to “make it new.” Melville is at his most bombastic when arguing for such a space for American literature:

Let us away with this Bostonian leaven of literary flunkeryism towards England ... 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 ... if any of our authors fail, or seem to fail ... let us clap him on the shoulder, and back him against all Europe for his second round. Melville might rightly be understood here as participating in what Andreas Huyssen termed modernism’s feminization of mass culture, and echoes of the modernist manifestoes to come ring in Melville’s prophesies for the potentiality of a literary future fully absolved from past models.6

Michael North reminds us that such modernist calls for a radical break from the past have a long history, recalling antecedents in much the way Ezra Pound’s famous dictum had its roots in eighteenth-century BCE Chinese sources.7 Imperatives like Melville’s calling for distance from both historical precedent and popular cultural forms are themselves twice-told tales, never fully achieving their ends yet simultaneously making space for transformative changes in literary history. As modernist stream of consciousness would later disrupt the stability and unity of the omniscient narrator in the nineteenth-century novel and modernist poetics challenged the conventions of established verse forms, so too might Melville’s transformations of the travel narrative in the distance from Typee to Moby-Dick or the mid-century sentimental novel in Pierre be regarded as protomodernist formal innovations to dominant literary modes of the nineteenth century.

Moby-Dick’s heteroglossic, polyvocal and experimental passages, as in the “Midnight, Forecastle” chapter, both reach back to earlier literary models and challenge the reigning aesthetic unity of the novel in ways that anticipate modernist fragmentation. The “indefiniteness [that] shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe” in “The Whiteness of the Whale,” where totalizing knowledge is both desired and occluded, is merely one iteration of Melville’s refusal to let go of the desire for the holistic even as it acknowledges its ultimate impossibility.8 The sub-sub-librarian’s opening extracts and etymologies in Moby-Dick are “as full of any spurious scholarship of the imagination,” Harold Beaver reminds us, “as any later apparatus criticus by a Borges or Nabokov,” recalling a literary past (and anticipating a literary future) that it profoundly disrupts.9 Pierre Glendinning’s desire to turn from the “Tropical Summer” of his
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early poetry to face the "devouring profundities" of his uncompleted masterwork, and being himself devoured in turn, marks yet another iteration of this incomplete disavowal of literary conventions. Indeed, Melville's affinity for the unresolved intellectual and interpretive puzzle, figured perhaps most directly in The Confidence-Man's metatextual shell game of narrative voices, anticipates the fragmentation of nineteenth-century certainties in twentieth-century modernist masterworks.

These anticipations of modernism in Melville's own writing were widely adopted into the criticism and work of practicing modernists in the twentieth century, the discovery and publication of Billy Budd in 1924 ensuring that Melville's work received a modernist reception in its own right. The first such tentative foray by a major modernist author is Virginia Woolf's, who in 1919, before the full flowering of the Melville revival, wrote a centenary essay titled simply "Herman Melville." It begins with an acknowledgment of Melville's falling from the public eye, offering brief comparisons to Paul Gauguin and Robert Louis Stevenson, but largely limiting his contributions to the recording of a sailor's encounter with the South Seas. His is an account of the "diseases of civilization," and Woolf struggles to create any distance between Melville's biography and his narrative account of desertion, captivity, acquiescence and return.

Woolf returned to Melville in 1929 with an essay in three parts for the Bookman titled "Phases of Fiction." Following a discussion of Laurence Sterne (himself another paragon of the protomodern), Melville is termed a novelist-as-poet, with explicit comparisons made between him and Emily Brontë in contradistinction to Marcel Proust: "both Emily Brontë and Herman Melville ignore the greater part of those spoils of the modern spirit which Proust grasps so tenaciously and transforms so triumphantly." Theirs is a simplification of human psychology, which "far from being empty, has greatness, and we feel that something beyond, which is not human yet does not destroy their humanity or the actions." Melville here resists individuation, becoming an inchoate part of a phase of the novel through which modern literature must pass into a new eventuality:

We can imagine so many different sorts of novels, we are conscious of so many relations and susceptibilities the novelist had not expressed that we break off... without any pretense that the phases of fiction are complete or that our desires as a reader have received full satisfaction. On the contrary, reading excites them; they well up and make us inarticulately aware of how a dozen different novels that wait just below the horizon unwritten. Hence the futility at present of any theory of "the future of fiction." The next ten years will certainly upset it; the next century will blow it to the winds.
Melville, in Woolf’s elliptical accounts, is both distinct from the modern novel and gives rise to it, presaging in whatever limited way a new “phase” not yet accomplished in the development of the twentieth-century novel.

In the years between these two essays, D. H. Lawrence devoted two chapters in his intently iconoclastic Studies in Classic American Literature (1923) to accounts of Typee, Omoo and Moby-Dick, respectively. “There is something slithery in him,” Lawrence avowed, evincing a primitivist fascination with Melville’s perceived otherness in the frame of his South Seas encounters. Lawrence deemed this a resistance to civilization, again connecting Melville to Gauguin, yet Lawrence saw Melville’s later career as a repudiation of these early freedoms: “As a matter of fact, a long thin chain was round Melville’s ankle all the time, binding him to America, to civilization, to democracy, to the ideal world. It was a long chain, and it never broke. It pulled him back.” Melville according to this account demonstrates a modernist pull toward transgression that he can never fully actualize, a dialectic between disruption and convention often figured in racial and cultural terms:

[Americans] keep their old-fashioned ideal frock-coat on, and an old-fashioned silk hat, while they do the most impossible things. There you are: you see Melville hugged in bed by a huge tattooed South Sea Islander, and solemnly offering burnt offering to this savage’s little idol, and his ideal frock-coat just hides his shirt-tails and prevents us from seeing his bare posterior as he salaams, while his ethical silk hat sits correctly over his brow the while.13

According to Lawrence, Melville can flaunt convention only so far (Melville and Ishmael are wholly conflated in Lawrence’s account), and the cultural, religious, sexual and racial heterodoxy represented in Ishmael and Queequeg’s “hearts’ honeymoon” must nonetheless be dressed up in the customary. Yet these critiques give way by chapter’s end to extended citations of Moby-Dick’s language, and in places Melville becomes largely indistinguishable from Lawrence’s own masculinist prose. Moby-Dick “is a surpassingly beautiful book,” Lawrence concludes, “with an awful meaning, and bad jolts.”14 "These jolts might themselves be understood as constitutive of the modernist challenge to aesthetic totality, evidenced in Lawrence’s own disjunctive, percussive critique of his subject.

To chart how far Melville’s reputation among the modernists had grown since Woolf’s centennial essay, E. M. Forster’s Aspects of the Novel, based on a series of 1927 lectures he gave at Trinity College, Cambridge, sets out to define its subject against the immensity of Melville’s example: “no intelligent
remark known to me will define the tract [of the novel] as a whole. All we can say of it is that it is bounded by two chains of mountains neither of which rises very abruptly – the opposing ranges of Poetry and History – and bounded on a third side by a sea – a sea that we shall encounter when we come to *Moby Dick.* Melville thus stands apart from his contemporaries, yet is connected to authors across centuries throughout the lectures. Sterne is again invoked as a protomodern exemplar – “what is essential in Sterne and Melville belongs to this new aspect of fiction: the fantastical-prophetic axis,” Forster writes – and in a lecture on the role of prophecy in the working of the novel, Emily Brontë, Dostoyevsky and Lawrence himself are included as Melville’s interlocutors, indicating Forster’s development of a critical conversation amongst his contemporary modernists. “Moby Dick is an easy book,” he continues, “as long as we read it as a yarn or an account of whaling interspersed with snatches of poetry. But as soon as we catch the song in it, it grows difficult and immensely important.”

Forster here reflects a version of the much-vaunted modernist difficulty; Melville is described as “spasmodically realistic,” leading to the conclusion that: “*Moby Dick* is full of meanings; its meaning is a different problem …. Nothing can be stated about *Moby Dick* except that it is a contest. The rest is song.” The novel here resists description in some essential way, the invocation of song leading Forster to a discussion of the just-published *Billy Budd,* which he similarly describes in terms of alienation and distance: “a remote unearthly episode, but it is a song not without words…. [Melville] reaches straight back into the universal, to a blackness and sadness so transcending our own that they are indistinguishable from glory.” Forster would literalize this dark song, serving as librettist for Benjamin Britten’s 1951 opera adapted from *Billy Budd.* Forster stated it was to be his “Nunc Dimittis, in that it dismisses me peacefully, and convinces me I have achieved.” Minou Arjomand reminds us that Forster “saw himself not as the coauthor of the libretto of *Billy Budd* but as the coauthor of *Billy Budd* itself.” Thus, in these three modernist accounts, we have traveled from Melville’s critical invisibility to authorial identification, charting the distance Melville’s reputation spanned in the eight years dividing Woolf’s first effort to *Aspects of the Novel.*

From the 1920s, many prominent American modernists championed Melville’s writings. Take the example of William Faulkner, who when asked in the middle of the Melville revival what book he would like most to have written, answered with Faulknerian aplomb:

> I think that the book which I put down with the unqualified thought “I wish I had written that” is *Moby Dick.* The Greek-like simplicity of it: a man of forceful character driven by his sombre nature and his bleak heritage,
bent on his own destruction and dragging his immediate world down with him with a despotic and utter disregard of them as individuals; the fine point to which the various natures caught [and passive as though with a foreknowledge of unalterable doom] in the fatality of his blind course are swept — a sort of Golgotha of the heart become immutable as bronze in the sonority of its plunging ruin; all against the grave and tragic rhythm of the earth in its most timeless phase: the sea. And the symbol of their doom: a White Whale.¹⁹

Many of the themes that Faulkner would return to again and again in his own corpus — the weight of history on the actions of the present, humanity's capacities for evil, the explicit imbrication of the actual and the apocryphal — are felt here in this early appraisal, written two years before the publication of his first modernist masterpiece, The Sound and the Fury. Faulkner's multiple narrators, first in The Sound and the Fury and then in As I Lay Dying, make early appearances in the "Midnight, Forecastle" and "The Doubloon" chapters of Moby-Dick, as well as The Confidence-Man. Both The Sound and the Fury and Pierre share figures of incest as a means to escape the pressures of a familial past, failed endeavors that ultimately destroy their protagonists. Likewise, Quentin's desire to know Bon's lineage and Sutpen's murderous past in Absalom, Absalom! mirrors the perpetual frustration to fully understand both the white whale's hieroglyphics and Ahab's monomania through the lens of Ishmael's relentlessly discursive investigations. Race is one, or perhaps the crucial determinant in the violence wrought throughout the two novels, and while Faulkner's early letter only obliquely hints at this reading of Moby-Dick, it would become the leitmotif of his most enduring and formally inventive works.²⁰

Enumerating all such connections between Melville's influence and modernist production exceeds the bounds of this essay. Drawing connections between Bartleby and Beckett, say, promises to expand the intersections between nineteenth-century American literature and so-called high modernism. The influence of Melville's distinctively global fictions on global modernisms, particularly in Latin America and the Global South more broadly, remains understudied in the critical literature. Indeed, the trajectories traced in this essay dwell largely on a very familiar lineage of mostly white, male authors. Much work remains to explore Melville's impact and legacies on writers of color, and in turn the ways in which these inheritors have reshaped our contemporary understandings of his corpus.

Viewed as capstone to Melville's modernism, as well as prolegomenon to a postmodern Melville, Ralph Ellison's wrestling with Melville's legacies to American literature in Invisible Man might serve as an important first step.²¹ Ellison's intense admiration for the works of high modernism led him to retype word for word passages from Hemingway, Stein, Joyce
and Faulkner as a kind of literary apprenticeship; we might meaningfully add Melville to this list. Ellison’s masterwork begins with an epigraph from “Benito Cereno,” his riotous veterans chase *Invisible Man*’s narrator from the Golden Day, the selfsame title of Lewis Mumford’s first critical account of Melville, and Ellison’s protean Rinehart owes much to *The Confidence-Man*.

Yet this influence is itself protean. Ellison like Melville before him, appropriates numerous literary genres and modes of discourse from others. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, Ellison creates intricate patterns of repetition and revision that are the result of black vernacular practices stemming from pre-diasporic African religious and cultural forms, as well as the uniquely double-voiced quality of African American texts that speak to black and Western literary traditions alike.22 When in his prologue the unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man* sees the “darkness of lightness” with his head ringing from the violence visited on it, he ultimately descends into a modernist, marijuana-fueled vision that signifies upon Melville’s “great black parliament sitting in Tophet” at the outset of *Moby-Dick*.23 Part surrealistic nightmare, part congregational call and response, part jazz improvisation, Ellison’s prologue explodes Melville’s “blackness of blackness” sermon and in doing so incorporates his text into the African American vernacular. No longer is the black church episode merely an Africanist screen upon which to project Ishmael’s heroized sexual, cultural and religious transgressions in his marriage bed with Queequeg chapters later.24 Ellison’s reinhabitation of Melville in turn expands the signification of his reference to blacks, Ishmael’s sympathy for Pip once on board the *Pequod* more thoroughly evading mere minstrelsy after Ellison’s rereading, even as it participates broadly in what might rightly be called America’s signal contribution to nineteenth-century popular culture. Ellison’s revisions of *Moby-Dick*’s antecedence, alongside the modernists before him, extend this history of modernism’s hold on Melville, pulling him into twentieth-century registers that continue to shape his reception to the present day.

**Notes**


2 A much longer version of this argument for Melville as protomodernist, while still drawing deeply from popular literary genres of his time, can be found in David M. Ball, *False Starts: The Rhetoric of Failure and the Making of American Modernism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

3 *Writings*, vol. ix, 242–3.
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Ibid., 240, 253.
8 Writings, vol. vi, 195.
10 Writings, vol. vii, 245, 305. Edgar A. Dryden, “Mute Monuments and Doggerel Epitaphs: Melville’s Shattered Sequels,” in America’s Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon, ed. Kathryn V. Lindberg and Joseph G. Kronick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 107, terms Pierre’s accounts of writing “acts of inscribing and interring and associating them with the vain attempts to represent the unrepresentable, name the unnameable, and conceptualize the inconceivable.”
12 Virginia Woolf, “Phases of Fiction,” Bookman 69 (1929), 408.
14 Ibid., 150.
16 Ibid., 94, 97–8.
18 Admiration was certainly not universal among Melville’s modernist readers; Joseph Conrad, asked to write an introduction to Moby-Dick in 1907, colorfully refused: “Years ago I looked into Typee and Omoo, but as I didn’t find there what I am looking for when I open a book I did go no further. Lately I had in my hand Moby Dick. It struck me as a rather strained rhapsody with whaling for a subject and not a sincere line in the 3 vols of it” (The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 9 vols. [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983–2008], vol. iii, 408).
20 Kevin J. Hayes, Herman Melville (London: Reaktion, 2017), 140, identifies further parallels between Pierre and Absalom, Absalom!
21 When Humbert Humbert, early in his metafictional peregrinations in Lolita, finds himself on an artic expedition, establishing “a weather station on Pierre Point in Melville Sound,” the postmodern play of references has been established through a long modernist genealogy of explicit praise and implicit

