

The Consequences of Canonicity for Cultural Representativeness; or, The Whale

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

December 14, 2019

Nashville, Tennessee

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I. Introduction

This paper takes up the problem of representation in literary studies from the standpoint of the study of culture. To study the culture of a nation through its cultural products is necessarily to presume that one's objects of study—in this case, literary works—are culturally representative. Although “a description of the national consciousness which does not take literature into account is wholly inadequate,”¹ the presumption that works of literature are culturally representative of the nations in, by, and for which they were produced cannot be held uncritically in view of the dynamism that characterizes the relationship between literature and culture. This paper aims to elucidate the literature-culture relationship as it emerges in the intersection between canonicity and the nation. I argue that canonicity indexes the perception of a work's inherent value, the transcendent quality that frees a work from its immediate spatiotemporal context and maintains the work's cultural value through time. This perceived value, however, is only illusory, as the cultural value of a work lies not within the text of the literature as such but rather emerges from the evaluative interactions of the text's readers. In a continual feedback loop, the evaluation of a work as canonical forms readers into communities primed to receive the work as culturally valuable and to perpetuate that assessment of its value in turn.

I explore this community-forming effect of canonicity, and its implications for the cultural representativeness of a literary work, as it is put into the service of a kind of literary nation-making. I argue that the American nation is characterized by a sense of incompleteness that emerges in consequence of the nation's spatiotemporal particularities and manifests in what one

¹ Leo Marx, “American Studies. A Defense of an Unscientific Method,” 82.

scholar identifies as cultural legitimation anxiety, which, I contend, is the anxiety that the nation has not yet been fully realized and exists only as an unfulfilled potentiality. Using Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* as a kind of case study, I investigate the consequences for cultural representativeness when canonical literature is positioned in response to the nation's sense of incompleteness, proposing that literature takes on a dually representative and generative role with regard to culture and that this role is enabled by the illusory cultural value signaled in the novel's canonicity.

Beginning with an analysis of the concept of the Great American Novel as a nationally identified expression of canonicity, I trace the anxious desire for national reification via literary representation, elucidating the contours of the singular novel that will hold the image of the nation in mythic cohesion and totality. I explore the canonicity of Melville's novel and ultimately locate canonicity's expression within the figure of the Whale—imbued with elastic powers of representation, the Whale transubstantiates the literature-culture relationship, enabling *Moby-Dick* to disseminate as cultural rather than literary artifact, incorporated into and as culture itself. I argue that the novel's circulation as cultural artifact, what I call its *re-presentation*, is characterized by expansive and flexible availability, enabled by the novel's canonical status. Instances of re-presentation distance the meaning of the novel from its literal text, demonstrating that the cultural value of *Moby-Dick* does not lie within Melville's prose but is rather crafted and perpetuated by Melville's readers and, thus, that the cultural representativeness of a literary work is therefore to be found in the dynamism of the work's dissemination.

II. The Great American Novel and the Anxious Nation

I focus my investigation into the question of cultural representativeness with regard to highly culturally valued literature on the phenomenon of the Great American Novel as a nationally identified expression of canonicity. As we will see, the Great American Novel (GAN) indexes the supposedly transcendent value of a literary work to the nation as a national community of readers, and that value derives from the perceived national, cultural representativeness of the work. The concept of the GAN takes up the problem of representation in such a way that exceeds the boundaries of formal literary studies scholarship, extending the question of the literature-culture relationship throughout the cultural consciousness of the national readership. In 2006, the editor of *The New York Times Book Review* surveyed “a couple of hundred prominent writers, critics, editors and other literary sages,” asking them to “identify ‘the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years.’”² In an essay describing the results of this survey, A. O. Scott writes, “E pluribus unum, as it were. We—Americans, writers, American writers—seem often to be a tribe of mavericks dreaming of consensus. Our mythical book is the one that will somehow include everything, at once reflecting and by some linguistic magic dissolving our intractable divisions and stubborn imperfections.”³ Respondents to the survey, Scott indicates, were preoccupied by the complexity of representativeness in the literature-culture relationship, which they took to be at the crux of the editor’s question, seemingly assuming that the single best work of American fiction must be a comprehensive representation of the American nation: “The best works of fiction, according to our tally, appear to be those that successfully assume a burden of cultural importance. They attempt not just the

² A. O. Scott, “In Search of the Best.”

³ Scott, “In Search.”

exploration of particular imaginary people and places, but also the illumination of epochs, communities, of the nation itself. America is not only their setting but also their subject.”⁴

Though the *Book Review*'s survey question was not specifically phrased as the search for recently published Great American Novels, Scott's analysis of the survey's responses reveals the same desire for holistic national, cultural representation in literary works that drives the GAN project.

In an 1868 essay published in *The Nation*, author John William DeForest coins the term “Great American Novel,” and his original description of the project as the “task of painting the American soul within the framework of a novel”⁵ registers the mythical, magical quality, per Scott, that imbues the prospect of a single literary work portraying the nation in the reality of its fractures while also presenting to the nation its own fantasy of union in totality. I contend that as a “reference [point] for imagining U.S. national identity,”⁶ the GAN embodies the problem of representation in the literature-culture relationship, as the phenomenon of the GAN registers the desire for a national literary tradition, the impetus for which ties the cultural representativeness of literature to the reality of the nation. In *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Lawrence Buell observes that “one common trigger of talk about ‘great’ or defining ‘national’ novels has been cultural legitimation anxiety,” which “seems to flourish best either in postcolonial situations where national identity remains contested, or where independence is desired but still unattained.”⁷ This anxiety for cultural legitimation points to an understanding of “nation making

⁴ Scott, “In Search.”

⁵ John William DeForest, “The Great American Novel,” 27.

⁶ Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 6.

⁷ Buell, *The Dream*, 12.

itself ... as a kind of narrative creation.”⁸ That is, the desire for a body of culturally valued and valuable national literature, for an American literary canon, betrays an anxiety over the reality of the nation, a fear that the nation is not quite real joined with a belief that representative literary works will yet make it so.

The crisis of cultural legitimation underlying the desire for an American literary canon speaks to a sense of national incompleteness. By this sense of incompleteness, in the context of national literary legitimation, I mean the perception of unresolved disjunctions—the divisions that belie the fantasy of the nation as holistic totality, as a nation *e pluribus unum*, and the chasm between the nation as it is and the nation as it promises to be. What drives the search for definitive national representation via literature is, in other words, the perception of the nation itself as unfulfilled, yet awaiting its fullest fruition. In his analysis of the GAN phenomenon, Buell identifies a number of causal factors, the set of which concerns the particularities of American geography and spatiality, demographic diversity, national ideology, and teleological temporality. I highlight several of these factors, arguing that each reveals an anxiety of representative insufficiency, that is, a discomfort with the absence of a singular literary work that, in its mythical transcendence of division, reifies the nation by representing the nation to itself.

Buell’s set of causal factors begins with the “sheer territorial bulk” of the country, “the sense of national bigness” that presents “[t]he heady challenge of getting a whale-sized country between covers.”⁹ Accompanying the spatial expanse of the country is the question of “whether and how nationness can be robustly imagined by works of literature at other than a regional or

⁸ Buell, *The Dream*, 10.

⁹ Buell, *The Dream*, 13.

sectional level, as well as disputes over the extent to which the experiences of minority groups can be generalized as part of a collective fabric,”¹⁰ indicating the problem the American nation’s immanent regionalism poses for comprehensive national representation. From its first appearance, the GAN project has been fraught with this tenuousness of national cohesion: DeForest critiques the “localism” of the New England-focused novels of the time, writing, “When you have made your picture of petrified New England village life, left aground like a boulder near the banks of the Merrimac, does the Mississippian or the Pennsylvanian recognize it as American society? We are a nation of provinces, and each province claims to be the court.”¹¹ This regionalism, in part a result of the nation’s size, hinders the national representativeness of a literary work, resulting in the provincialism of American works of literature, their piecemeal representations of the nation.

Of Buell’s causal factors, most clearly registering the sense of incompleteness is “the future-oriented cast of thinking about U.S. nationness”—“the tradition of imagining the United States as more a country of the future than of the past.”¹² This teleological ordering structures the nation as still incomplete, perpetually yet to come, and the same sense of perpetual horizon characterizes the GAN. Buell explains that “the expectation of something momentous perpetually waiting to be born is implicit in GAN thinking from the start: the assumption that the GAN is a plural disguised as a singular—a horizon to be grasped after, approximated, but never reached, a game that writers, readers, publishers all want to keep on playing.”¹³ Drawing together these two manifestations of incompleteness in perpetuity, DeForest explains the difficulty of

¹⁰ Buell, *The Dream*, 13.

¹¹ DeForest, “The Great American Novel,” 28, 29.

¹² Buell, *The Dream*, 13, 14.

¹³ Buell, *The Dream*, 8.

producing the GAN: “Ask a portrait-painter if he can make a good likeness of a baby, and he will tell you that the features are not sufficiently marked nor the expression sufficiently personal. Is there not the same difficulty in limning this continental infant of American society, who is changing every year not only in physical attributes, but in the characteristics of his soul?”¹⁴ The challenge of the representative GAN is in capturing the likeness of a nation always in motion.

III. Evaluation and the Production of Culture

The concept of the GAN is thus formulated according to two interrelated roles: the GAN ought to be representative of the American nation in totality, but absent a realized, cohesive nation, the GAN must itself produce the image of totality it purports to represent. These dual roles of canonical national literature highlight the multifarious and dynamic relationship of literature to culture. On the one hand, literature might be said to *comprise* culture. That is, a literary work is an expression of its contemporary cultural environment and is read as a representation of American culture as it existed in the work’s contemporary moment. Henry Nash Smith, for example, implies this view when he suggests that “individual instances [of literature] embody whatever uniformities may exist in a culture.”¹⁵ On the other hand, literature might be said to *compose* culture. That is, a literary work is constitutive of the culture to which it belongs and is read as a collaborative effort between author and audience to produce a conceptualization of America from within the context of their contemporary cultural moment. Smith exemplifies this view when he writes of Mark Twain, “I can think of no other man whose work so clearly needs to be placed in a social setting before it can be fully understood. No other

¹⁴ DeForest, “The Great American Novel,” 29.

¹⁵ Henry Nash Smith, “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?,” 208.

American writer of comparable importance is so unmistakably of the people. He took his materials and his technique from American culture, and he developed in collaboration with his audience.”¹⁶ What these two views of the literature-culture relationship illustrate is the problem of the chicken or the egg—either the culture preexists the literary work, which merely channels received aspects of American culture, presenting them for the reader’s study; or the work is actively involved in creating an American culture that is necessarily yet to come at the point of the work’s publication, a possibility that elides easy classification of literature as culturally representative.

Further complicating these two chicken-or-egg constructions is the sense that literary works of great significance transcend the divisions and passage of time and are ultimately unmoored from their cultural specificity, demonstrating their value outside of the cultural context of a particular time and place. Offering one indication of this phenomenon, Leo Marx writes, “The writers whose works endure as art tend on the whole to be the most critical of—the most emancipated from—the prevailing culture. If our purpose is to represent the common life, then we should not turn to the masterpieces we continue to read and enjoy.”¹⁷ It is this problem of the cultural representativeness of these masterpieces, the literary works of canonical status, that this paper explores. Though Marx may be too hasty in drawing the equivalence between the critical characteristic of a work and its relative distance from the culture it criticizes, his claim here gestures toward the sense of “intrinsic merit” attending a canonical work, “its satisfying power, its capacity to provide a coherent organization of thought and feeling, ... its compelling truth value.”¹⁸ “All value,” however, “is radically contingent, being neither an inherent property of

¹⁶ Smith, “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?,” 197.

¹⁷ Marx, “American Studies,” 89.

¹⁸ Marx, “American Studies,” 89.

objects nor an arbitrary projection of subjects but, rather, the product of the dynamics of an economic system,” as Barbara Herrnstein Smith explains.¹⁹ The illusion of consensus about the value of a work, its apparent consistent cultural relevance across time, obfuscates the real processes of cultural evaluation. Smith notes, “[A] co-incidence of contingencies among individual subjects will be interpreted by those subjects as noncontingency,” as the valued fruits inherent to a valuable work.²⁰ Cultural evaluation is a dynamic process, and it is the replication of a set of contingencies over time that engenders repetitive evaluations and produces the illusion of a canonical work’s static value. In actuality, the value of a literary work is always flexibly responding to the dynamism of both the larger societal, or cultural, economy and the individual personal economies of each subject who encounters the work.²¹

This process of evaluation, which is “indistinguishable,” Smith writes, “from the very processes of acting and experiencing themselves,” is socially oriented and acts upon the relationship of the evaluated literary work to its cultural context.²² Evaluation, Smith points out, is a form of social communication: we evaluate literature for ourselves and for others, and in doing so, we implicitly form and maintain communities of readers primed to receive as culturally valuable the literary works we have already determined to have such value. The process of evaluation is thus itself a determinant of value, meaning that our scholarly interactions with literary works are never neutral but instead participate in the assertion and maintenance of a work’s cultural value.²³ Illustrating this community-making effect of cultural evaluation on the

¹⁹ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 11.

²⁰ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 17.

²¹ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 11–12.

²² Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 19.

²³ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 20, 25.

canonicity of a work, Marx observes of *Moby-Dick*, “The importance we attach to the novel arises, in the last analysis, from the fact that today it is read, studied, and incorporated in our sense of ourselves and of our world, past and present.”²⁴ The evaluation that repeatedly produces the cultural value of canonical literary works does so in part by forming receptive communities of readers and in turn constructing the larger culture, the culturally legitimate nation, out of these readerships.

Community formation is not the exclusively post-publication effect of the process of evaluation. Rather, the entire process of literary production is a negotiation of value, beginning with “the thousand individual acts of approval and rejection, preference and assessment, trial and revision” on the part of the author and continuing with “the innumerable implicit acts of evaluation performed by those who ... publish the work, purchase, preserve, display, quote, cite, translate, perform, allude to, and imitate it.”²⁵ As Smith explains:

Every literary work ... is thus the product of a complex evaluative feedback loop that embraces not only the ever-shifting economy of the artist’s own interests and resources as they evolve during and in reaction to the process of composition, but also all the shifting economies of his or her assumed and imagined audiences, including those who do not yet exist but whose emergent interests ... the artist will attempt to predict ... and to which ... his or her own sense of the fittingness of each decision will be responsive.²⁶

Smith demonstrates that the writing process negotiates the tension between many competing economies of value, and her explanation of the process of evaluation highlights the crucial fact that the completion of the composition and publication of a literary work does not signal the completion of the negotiation of value: the published work is only “a temporary truce among contending forces, achieved at the point of exhaustion” and not a completed monument to “the

²⁴ Marx, “American Studies,” 89.

²⁵ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 24, 25.

²⁶ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 24.

achieved consummation of that process.”²⁷ Smith’s elucidation of literary production as the ongoing navigation of multiple and competing economies of value that both precedes and exceeds the event of publication leads us to understand a work of literature as a collaborative and generative, though perpetually unfinished, cultural product.

IV. *Moby-Dick* as the Great American Novel

Exemplifying the dually representative and generative relationship between literature, culture, and ultimately, the nation is Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, which achieved its GAN status in the mid-twentieth century, following the Melville revival of the 1920s.²⁸ In the same period, the novel also rose to prominence in American literary studies, in concomitance with the production of American Studies as a discipline. As Donald Pease writes, “*Moby Dick* was not, for scholars of American Studies, merely an object of analysis. It provided the field itself with a frame narrative that included the norms and assumptions out of which the field was organized.”²⁹ Significantly, the novel’s ascension in American Studies was predicated on its representativeness of the American nation. Pease describes the approach of American Studies scholarship, writing:

The action that *Moby Dick* narrated was made to predict the world-scale antagonism of the Cold War. The narrative provided the state with an image of itself as overcoming the totalitarian other to which it defined itself as opposed, and it supplied the literary sphere with an image of itself as exempt from the incursions of the state. Overall this frame narrative assisted in structuring the constitutive understanding of the society it purported to represent. ... The disciplines within the field of American Studies intersected with the United States as a geopolitical area whose boundaries field specialists were assigned the task of at once naturalizing and policing. ... [I]nterpreters of *Moby Dick* had

²⁷ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 24.

²⁸ Buell, *The Dream*, 383.

²⁹ Donald E. Pease, “C. L. R. James’s *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* and the World We Live In,” xxviii.

accommodated its themes to the national mythology through which they had demarcated and policed the national border.³⁰

The simultaneous ascensions of the novel within American literary scholarship and as a GAN both proceeded under the auspices of the novel's national-cultural representativeness, from which the American nation could imagine and define itself and out of which the imagined nation could emerge reified. *Moby-Dick* ascends to canonicity, in other words, to both produce and maintain a representative image of the nation.

Typifying the approach of this emergent scholarship to the novel described by Pease is F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*. Published in 1941, *American Renaissance* celebrates the "great number of our past masterpieces ... produced in one extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression" in the nineteenth century.³¹ Matthiessen describes his reading of these literary works in his introduction, writing, "It may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a *re-birth*, but that was how the writers themselves judged it. Not as a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America's way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture."³² Matthiessen reads Melville and his contemporaries as having "wrote literature for democracy in a double sense." "They felt," Matthiessen continues, "that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity."³³ From Matthiessen's introduction, we find a conceptualization of the American literary tradition as the

³⁰ Pease, "C. L. R. James's *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*," xxviii–xxix.

³¹ F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, vii.

³² Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, vii.

³³ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, xv.

generative response to anxiety surrounding the fulfillment of the nation, whose representative image the authors must produce.

The nation conceived in liberty, as Lincoln put it, thus awaits its emergence in culture, and it would, in Matthiessen's reading, be up to the writers of the mid-nineteenth century to produce the literary works that would evidence the nation's legitimacy. Prefacing Matthiessen's introduction is a page of two epigraphs (figure 1) that both reflects the anxiety felt over the insufficiency of the nation and relates that anxiety, in the conjunction of the two epigraphs, to the teleological timing of the nation that holds national fulfillment as its perpetual horizon.³⁴

'There is a moment in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness and have not yet become microscopic: so that man, at that instant, extends across the entire scale, and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of night, converses by his eyes and brain with solar and stellar creation. That is the moment of adult health, the culmination of power.'

—EMERSON, *Representative Men*.

**'Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.'**

—marked by Melville in his
copy of *King Lear*.

Figure 1. Epigraphs from F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*

Beginning from a standpoint of youthful national history, the quoted passage from Emerson is temporally oriented along a linear chronology towards the future, from youth to adulthood. The second epigraph, however, complicates this future-oriented pull: men, and nations, must endure their originary pasts as much as their anticipated futures. The perceived dearth of canonical

³⁴ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, n.p.

American literature, in Matthiessen's reading and the readings of others, owes to the youthfulness of the nation, and this recognized insufficiency of the past, of what has not yet emerged, produces the anxiety over national legitimation. Scott, for example, writes, "The American literary tradition is relatively young, and it stands in perpetual doubt of its own coherence and adequacy—even, you might say, of its own existence. Such anxiety fosters large, even utopian ambitions."³⁵ Explaining this anxiety, Buell writes, "The persistent desire ... for defining fictionalizations of national life implies a durable quasi-understanding among authors, publishing industry, and readers at large as to the legitimacy of reading 'the national' through *N* number of putative touchstone narratives."³⁶ When Matthiessen writes, "In reading the ... expression of our first great age, we can feel the challenge of our still undiminished resources,"³⁷ his optimistic phrasing threatens to obfuscate the reality that "our still undiminished resources" are, actually, our still unfulfilled potentialities. Matthiessen's retrospective reading of Melville and his contemporaries illustrates the production of the nation through literature as a response to the sense of national incompleteness, to the Revolutionary promises made but left unrealized. The perpetual conferring of canonical status, such as that of the GAN, on particular literary works indicates the role of literature in producing national identity and constituting the nation as a community whose members share that identity. Assertions of canonicity build cultural community.

³⁵ Scott, "In Search."

³⁶ Buell, *The Dream*, 4.

³⁷ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, xv.

V. The Cultural Community of *Moby-Dick*

With regard to our case-study canonical work, the production of the nation through its representation to the national community of readers is especially demonstrated by readings of *Moby-Dick* that produce the novel as national allegory. Such readings can be found in both contemporary and retrospective responses to the novel. An 1851 review of *Moby-Dick* published in *Literary World*, for example, states, “To the popular mind this book of Herman Melville, touching the Leviathan of the deep, is as much of a discovery in Natural History as was the revelation of America by Christopher Columbus in geography.”³⁸ Exemplifying the intimate relations between literature, history, and the nation in its conjunction of the novel with Columbus’s “revelation” of America, this review is not alone in locating national meaning-making in the figure of the Whale, as we will see. A subsequent review in *Literary World* relatedly concludes:

A difficulty in the estimate of this, in common with one or two other of Mr. Melville’s books, occurs from the double character under which they present themselves. In one light they are romantic fictions, in another statements of absolute fact. When to this is added that the romance is made a vehicle of opinion and satire through a more or less opaque allegorical veil, ... the critical difficulty is considerably thickened.³⁹

Such evidence confirms Nina Baym’s observation that Melville was in his time seen, “at least in part,” as an allegorist,⁴⁰ yet the evaluation of *Moby-Dick* as allegory, and as national allegory in particular, continues throughout retrospective engagements with the work.

From the mid-twentieth century onward, many critical approaches have figured Ishmael as America’s literary representative. Pease, for example, remarks, “Matthiessen fostered an

³⁸ Evert Duyckinck, “Literature. Melville’s *Moby Dick*; or, *The Whale*. The Rose-Bud. Death Scenes of the Whale.”

³⁹ Evert Duyckinck, “Melville’s *Moby Dick*; or, *The Whale*.: Second Notice.”

⁴⁰ Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*, 92.

allegorical understanding of *Moby Dick* that posited Ahab's monomania as the symbol of the totalitarian Other in opposition to which Ishmael's Americanness was defined, elaborated upon, and defended."⁴¹ This classic approach "draw[s] attention to the ways in which Captain Ahab stands apart, or stands differently, from the ordinary American or the American population en masse."⁴² In such allegorical readings, "Captain Ahab is portrayed in some critical way as *not one of us*: foreign in the literal sense, foreign in the psychological sense, or both."⁴³ Over and against this traditional approach, Susan McWilliams more recently argues that Ahab is in fact America's allegorical representative, functioning as "an exaggerated caricature of the American character."⁴⁴ Buell figures a third potential for national representation out of the crew of the *Pequod*, which as a collective might "suggest a sort of national microcosm as against a snapshot of planetary humanity."⁴⁵ The importance of these repeated allegorical readings of the novel lies not in their accuracy or correctness with regard to the text but rather in the fact of their repetition. *Moby-Dick* has been evaluated by readers as a national allegory. Thus, *Moby-Dick* has been produced as a national allegory by and for a community of readers.

Buell writes, "To the extent the United States can be thought of as a culture of boundless aspiration at core, that in itself for some will clinch the case for *Moby-Dick* as the Great American Novel; for never was there an American novel of greater volcanic gusto."⁴⁶ Implied in Buell's observation is that the novel as a whole, undivided into its individual characters, mirrors America's representation of itself, to itself, as one nation, indivisible. Considering the question

⁴¹ Pease, "C. L. R. James's *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*," xiii.

⁴² Susan McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 109.

⁴³ McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 109.

⁴⁴ McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 112.

⁴⁵ Buell, *The Dream*, 378.

⁴⁶ Buell, *The Dream*, 360.

of representativeness in this holistic sense allows the most flexible exploration of the ways in which *Moby-Dick* has been read to produce the nation, both because the analysis need not be limited to a single representative character and because, we will see, the novel's relationship to the larger cultural context is repeatedly figured without specific textual reference. I argue that engendering the boundlessness that characterizes both the novel and the nation is the sense of incompleteness, which in view of the novel, derives from the fact that it may well be incomplete. It is well known that Melville wrote and revised *Moby-Dick* in at least two stages and that the English version, which was published first, differs in numerous instances from the American version, which Melville completed first but was published second. Readers of *Moby-Dick* notice its inconsistent narrative, internal contradictions, and unexplained shifts in thematic focus—as Buell puts it, “The plethora of loose ends is unmistakable.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the novel's sense of incompleteness has been approached as a feature with which to critically engage, and this approach has imbued the novel with elastic representative ability. Whereas treating a literary work as complete and definitive of its author's expression might foreclose some possibilities of meaning-making to the reader, the acknowledged sense of incompleteness that characterizes *Moby-Dick* holds the novel especially open for evaluations of representativeness. Recalling from Barbara Herrnstein Smith that a published work is only “a temporary truce” and not an “achieved consummation,” and that the processes of reading and evaluation are socially oriented and constitutive of community, we can see the effect perpetual incompleteness has on the novel as a dynamic and generative cultural force. The novel's “volcanic gusto” responds to the spatiotemporal boundlessness of the nation—its size, diversity, and expansive reach from past

⁴⁷ Buell, *The Dream*, 364.

into future—rendering allegorical readings that figure *Moby-Dick* as the fantasied singular work of national representation.

The elasticity of the novel's representativeness comes to the fore in discussions that locate the meaning of the novel in the figure of the Whale. Henry Nash Smith writes, "The axis of meaning in *Moby-Dick* is the contrast between what the White Whale means to Ahab and what it means to Ishmael. Indeed, in probing into this topic Melville discovers that there are as many interpretations of that Leviathan as there are consciousnesses to interpret it."⁴⁸ Matthiessen makes a related point when he observes that because "such a quality as whiteness can hold different contents at different times, or indeed at the same time," the multiplicity of potential meanings "should emphasize the futility of the game ... of trying to 'spot' in a paragraph exactly what the white whale stands for."⁴⁹ This critical focus on the meaning or meanings of the White Whale is not misplaced—the author himself so centralized the figure of the Whale to the novel that for him the two became interchangeable terms. In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne composed in June of 1851, Melville describes the state of his progress on the novel. He writes:

In a week or so, I go to New York, to bury myself in a third-story room, and work and slave on my "Whale" while it is driving through the press. *That* is the only way I can finish it now,—I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances. ... But I was talking about the "Whale." As the fishermen say, "he's in his flurry" when I left him some three weeks ago. I'm going to take him by his jaw, however, before long, and finish him up in some fashion or other.⁵⁰

The centrality of the Whale is additionally manifested by its textual primacy—for though boasting one of the most famous opening lines in anglophone literature, *Moby-Dick* does not quite begin "Call me Ishmael." Prefacing the emergence of our narrator are two sections,

⁴⁸ Henry Nash Smith, *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers*, 35.

⁴⁹ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 290.

⁵⁰ Herman Melville, "Melville's Letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne," in *Moby Dick*, 511–12.

Etymology and Extracts. The first traces various definitions and translations of the word *whale* throughout history, and the second lists its references in a variety of literary works, beginning with the Beginning: as Genesis tells us, “And God created great whales.”⁵¹ To begin at the novel’s beginning, then, is not to start the story with Ishmael but rather to enter the text with the Leviathan himself. What the Whale *means*, however, is less a product of the static text on the page than a product of readers’ dynamic interactions with the novel. Though the myriad possibilities for meaning belie any definitive claim for its referent, what remains consistent in approaches to the novel is the sense that the Whale does mean *something*.

VI. The Omnipresence of the Whale

In order to explore the representativity of the Whale, I consider Ishmael’s cetological contributions to the novel. The first of these chapters, aptly titled “Cetology,” sees Ishmael recite a history of “the men, small and great, old and new, landsmen and seamen, who have at large or in little, written of the whale.”⁵² In Ishmael’s reading, the work of each is an iterative improvement to the body of cetological scholarship though, despite each addition, the cetology remains imperfect, insufficiently comprehensive in its representation of the Whale. Having attempted his own taxonomic contribution, Ishmael concludes, “But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity.”⁵³ The sense of

⁵¹ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, n.p.

⁵² Melville, *Moby Dick*, 116.

⁵³ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 128.

incompletion characterizing the nation, the novel, and the cetology additionally attends the Whale itself, as the cetological chapter on the question of extinction, titled “Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish?—Will He Perish?,” demonstrates.

Ishmael opens this chapter by wondering, given the Whale’s descent into the present period “from the head-waters of the Eternities,” if “in the long course of his generations, he has not degenerated from the original bulk of his sires.”⁵⁴ Through an iterative investigation into the sizes of whales throughout historical accounts, Ishmael eventually concludes, “No. The whale of to-day is as big as his ancestors.”⁵⁵ In rejecting the possibility that the Whale has devolved, Ishmael provides evidence for a progressive, evolutionary rendering of the Whale as continually improving over time: for “not only are the whales of the present day superior in magnitude to those whose fossil remains are found in the Tertiary system (embracing a distinct geological period prior to man), but of the whales found in that Tertiary system, those belonging to its latter formations exceed in size those of its earlier ones.”⁵⁶ Such rendering speaks to the teleology of the nation, the progression towards the perpetual horizon of fulfillment, as that temporal orientation intersects with the nation’s anxious youthfulness, revealing the nation as it seeks both an immemorial past for its origin and the unachievable consummation of its ends.

Taking up the question of the Whale’s extinction, Ishmael determines that by virtue of the Whale’s incredible magnitude, illustrated by its enormity and longevity, the prospect that the Whale might “at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man,

⁵⁴ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 409.

⁵⁵ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 410.

⁵⁶ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 409.

smoke his last pipe, and then himself evaporate in the final puff⁵⁷ is simply an impossibility.

Ishmael thus concludes:

Wherefore, for all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water; he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin. In Noah's flood he despised Noah's Ark; and if ever the world is to be again flooded, like the Netherlands, to kill off its rats, then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies.⁵⁸

Recalling the analogy drawn by a contemporary reviewer between Melville's "touching the Leviathan of the deep" and "the revelation of America by Christopher Columbus," we see that the immortality of the Whale in Ishmael's historiography dislocates the origin of the nation: in revealing the immortality of the Whale, Ishmael relocates the revelation of America from Columbus's so-called discovery of the continent in 1492 to a refigured origin of America in antiquity. Through the novel produced by readers as "a sociopolitical allegory of American destiny,"⁵⁹ America, through the figure of the Whale, is effectively made to preexist itself. Concurrently, the nation is held in perennial unfulfillment, for the Whale is eternal, itself the perpetual horizon.

In reading the Whale as the nation's allegorical representative, it may seem that I am not taking the holistic view of the novel I promised, instead limiting my analysis to one character, the figure of the Whale. I contend, however, that the multiplicitous meanings of the Whale lend it a capacity for a kind of transubstantiation, such that the figure of the Whale comprises a kind of omnipresence in which it swims between its representative possibilities. I have read the Whale on one level of representation as the symbolic stand-in for America, but other representations

⁵⁷ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 410.

⁵⁸ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 413.

⁵⁹ Buell, *The Dream*, 360.

still and simultaneously remain. The variation in the novel's title, which appears as *The Whale*, as *Moby Dick*, and often as *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, registers the Whale's simultaneous representative embodiments as the novel's titular character, Moby Dick, and as the novel itself, Melville's own "Whale." Buell claims, "*Moby-Dick's* continual straining toward horizons of possibility that no actual book could hope to encompass becomes one of its marks of distinction not despite but because of such admissions of necessary imperfection,"⁶⁰ and his description recalls the boundless expanse that characterizes both the novel and the nation. Reading Buell's choice of "encompass" perhaps more literally than he intended, we see that the Whale's enormous potential for incorporation is the twin of the novel's sense of incompleteness. The omnipresent quality of the Whale enables the representation of the nation as itself omnipresent, stretching simultaneously into an unreachable past and an unrealizable future and with a magnitude exceeding its own borders.

Recalling Marx's observation that, with regard to *Moby-Dick* as a canonical work of American literature, "[t]he importance we attach to the novel arises, in the last analysis, from the fact that today it is read, studied, and incorporated in our sense of ourselves and of our world, past and present,"⁶¹ I suggest that the sense of transcendent value indexed by canonicity speaks to a transubstantiated relationship between literature and culture. That is, the literary work, apparently so suffused with its own value, saturates its cultural context such that the work diffuses as not merely as a cultural product but as culture itself. In terms of the cultural representation of America, "*Americanness*—as often as it has been articulated—continues to exist in so many cases as a set of feelings, dissolved in the air. ... [T]hese structures of feeling

⁶⁰ Buell, *The Dream*, 364.

⁶¹ Marx, "American Studies," 89.

are diffuse and uncertain, omnipresent, but not so easily made visible.”⁶² In the service of reifying the nation through the achievement of cultural legitimacy, the evaluation of a literary work as canonical responds to and mimics the nature of culture.

The mythic omnipresence of a singular work of representative totality, of the Great American Novel, manifests in two ways. First, in the fantasied GAN, the nation will be omnipresent, that is, all and entirely present, within the novel. Second, the novel will be omnipresent within the nation, diffused as culture itself, incorporated into our sense of ourselves by virtue of its own incorporation and representation of that sense—it will be canonical. Moreover, the boundlessness of the nation as a potentiality perpetually unrestrained by the limits of completion necessitates the omnipresence of the novel as manifested by the Whale: readings that produce *Moby-Dick* as national allegory imply that the nation already exists to be represented within the novel and in doing so obfuscate the dynamics of cultural evaluation that are continually crafting communities of readers primed to receive the novel as a canonical reference point for imagining national identity, for constituting the nation that is yet to be out of its literature.

I further argue that the omnipresence of the Whale works in tandem with the novel’s sense of incompleteness to produce the multiplicity of *Moby-Dick*’s re-presentations as an American cultural artifact, thus figuring the original reception of the novel in the nineteenth century as itself an unfulfilled potentiality held open for future consummation. Published in 1851, *Moby-Dick*, the story goes, was a career-ending failure for its once-popular author, condemning Melville and his work to obscurity until the twentieth century. Though the facts of

⁶² Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olson, *American Studies: A User’s Guide*, 16.

the novel's contemporary critical reception paint a more complex picture,⁶³ the story of Melville's rise, fall, and rediscovery remains the narrative of his career. This narrative proceeds along the same lines as Matthiessen's mid-nineteenth-century "re-birth." The twentieth century's Melville revival, the rediscovery and reanimation of the author and his work that continues today, is symptomatic of the same sense of unfulfilled potentiality that motivated the authors of America's nineteenth century, in Matthiessen's reading, to bring the nation to fruition through the production of its national culture. Narrating Melville's career as his rise, fall, and rediscovery implies that *Moby-Dick's* contemporary audience left the work of meaning-making unfinished, leaving it incumbent on a future generation, to paraphrase Matthiessen, to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the novel's publication. The appearance of the novel's static value, its dissemination as the canonical rendering of the nation, is thus made possible by the unseen dynamism of its cultural value.

VII. Consequences of Canonicity and the Re-presentation of *Moby-Dick*

Having investigated the question of national representation within and by the novel, we can now examine what I call the novel's re-presentation. By *re-presentation*, I mean to refer to *Moby-Dick's* appearance not, for example, in the syllabi of literature courses as the novel to be read in its literal, textual form but rather to its appearance in the larger cultural context of the post-Melville-revival world, irrespective of the novel's actual content, as a cultural artifact. Of this appearance, Jeffrey Insko writes:

[T]he popular image of *Moby-Dick* distills polysemy to epitome. The epitome is Ahab's quest for the white whale; ... nearly everything else in the novel is simply filtered out, so

⁶³ James L. Machor, *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820–1865*, 174–5.

that Melville's text is boiled down to a singular meaning that circulates freely, available and apparent to all—a meaning, furthermore, that is readily grasped regardless of whether one has even read the novel.⁶⁴

Enabling this distillation and its portability is the distinction between the novel and the idea of the novel. As Insko explains, “[W]hereas the traditional literary artifact—the novel Melville published in 1851—is one in which meaning is already overdetermined, the cultural artifact—the idea of the novel as it circulates in everyday public discourse—appears to be a counterforce to overdetermination, asserting singularity over multiplicity.”⁶⁵ The novel as cultural artifact, reduced to the quest for the Whale, sees its boundless enormity distilled into singular representation, from which drawn the idea of the novel, its cultural meaning, is drawn.

I identify three characteristics of the re-presentation of *Moby-Dick*, each of which expands the novel's reach of meaning, illuminating the problem of representation for the study of culture through literature. The first of these characteristics is the national unboundedness of *Moby-Dick*'s re-presentations. By *national unboundedness*, I mean the reach of the novel as cultural artifact beyond the spatial borders of the American nation and the temporal borders of its contemporary cultural moment. As Buell notes, “*Moby-Dick*'s dissemination as text, and its fertility as object of imitation, as icon, as logo, as metaphor, have no more stopped at the nation's borders than the *Pequod* did,”⁶⁶ and as Insko confirms, “As a cultural touchstone, *Moby-Dick* occupies a position with only a handful of other nineteenth-century literary productions ... that have exceeded their own textual and historical boundaries and entered into our common language.”⁶⁷ Mirroring its own textual content, the novel as cultural artifact is unmoored from its

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Insko, “‘All of Us Are Ahabs’: *Moby-Dick* in Contemporary Public Discourse,” 22.

⁶⁵ Insko, “‘All of Us Are Ahabs,’” 22.

⁶⁶ Buell, *The Dream*, 359.

⁶⁷ Insko, “‘All of Us Are Ahabs,’” 22.

American harbor. This national unboundedness registers the necessity for culturally representative literature of an omnipresent quality. The fantasied reification of the American nation through literature, engendered by the nation's spatiotemporal expanse, re-presents the nation as itself unmoored: the Whale's immortality unbinds the nation from its relatively recent historical origin, detaching America from the youthfulness that threatens its national legitimacy, and the Whale's magnitude encompasses the nation, incorporating America as a holistic entity that, greater than the sum of its parts, transcends the divisions of regionalism.

Exemplifying this first characteristic is a re-presentation of *Moby-Dick* in the form of a Great American Novel map (figure 2).⁶⁸ The cartographical form of this re-presentation recalls Buell's observations regarding the central role the nation's territorial expanse and divisions play in the complexities of representation. In a sense, this map literalizes the gap between national fantasy and national reality, illustrating the impossibility of one novel holding an indivisible nation within—as Ishmael tells us, “It is not down on any map; true places never are.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Hog Island Press, “The Great American Novel Map.”

⁶⁹ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 49.



Figure 2. The Great American Novel Map

The brief accompanying product description begins, “The Great American Novel: Places from the pages of America’s finest literary works’ chronologically celebrates 42 of the most important works of fiction inspired by life in the United States,” the multiplicity of featured works recalling the representative impulse of the GAN project. As we have seen, the idea of the GAN is the fantasy that a singular literary work might replace the whole of America despite the nation’s division into disparate parts and the fragility of national cohesion. Demonstrating the difficulty for representation posed by the unboundedness of both canonical literary works and the nation’s spatiotemporal expanse, the map plots each of the supposedly nationally representative works on an image of the United States, attaching the various GANs not to the nation as a singular, holistic

entity but rather to particular and divisible places within, indicating that the American cultural representation accomplished by each is regional and individualized, and implicitly insufficient with regard to comprehensive national representation. The map thus depicts the incompleteness of the GAN project, rendering the potentiality of the nation awaiting its emergence from literature as the perpetual horizon it is.

As the product description continues, it reveals the second characteristic of representation, the flexibility and dynamism of re-presenting *Moby-Dick* as cultural artifact, in a demonstration of the Whale's omnipresence: "From Ahab off Nantucket to Ignatius J. Reilly in the Big Easy, Tom Joad fleeing the Dust Bowl to HST entering Bat Country - the map plots numerous monumental landmarks from American literature on one 25 x 19" print." Although the description specifically claims to plot Ahab as a landmark of American literary history, a look at the map reveals no image of the peg-legged sea captain—the image of the Whale emerges in his absence. The Whale's capacity for transubstantiation appears to overwhelm all other potential representatives—the Whale alone stands for the novel. Moreover, *Moby-Dick* appears on this map as the chronologically first GAN, making the Whale the originary figure of the American literary canon. Recalling that the desire for nationally defining literature suggests cultural legitimation anxiety, we see that this map presents the Whale as the nexus of the nation and its representative literature, re-presenting the nation as having originated from the Whale as both ancient animal and American novel and thus replicating the novel's temporal dislocation.

In concomitance with spatiotemporal expanse of *Moby-Dick* as cultural artifact, the flexibility and dynamism of meaning across re-presentations ensures that the distilled and

portable idea of the novel “can be applied in endless contexts, to countless situations.”⁷⁰

Accounting for this flexibility and dynamism, Insko writes:

Elements of [canonical texts], often a central image or action that, for historically mutable reasons continues to resonate in differing historical contexts, have been absorbed by the culture at large and, at times, twisted out of all recognizable shape. ... [A]s signifiers that circulate independently of their “source,” the singular image or narrateme that popular culture extracts from these classic texts relocates the locus of meaning in culture rather than in an author or text.⁷¹

As Insko here suggests, the appearance of static value may be the result of a misunderstanding of the cultural artifact at hand: the novel may appear to be static in value because *the idea of the novel* is constantly changing, adapting to the contingencies of value operative in any given cultural moment. The flexibility and dynamism of works such as *Moby-Dick* enables the sense of omnipresence that attends canonical literature: as the canonical Whale swims between its various representative possibilities without itself appearing to change, so too does the cultural value of the novel continually fluctuate in response to competing value dynamics under the appearance of static value.

As a consequence of the unboundedness and flexibility that characterize the dissemination of the novel as cultural artifact, re-presentations of *Moby-Dick* can emerge from surprising contexts. In the fall of 2008, researchers in Peru discovered fossil evidence of a long-extinct species of sperm whale. Enormous and boasting teeth “more than twice the length and diameter of those found in modern sperm whales,” the twelve-million-year-old “monster” could not fail to remind its discoverers of the fearsome White Whale of *Moby-Dick*, and in fact, “So taken [were] they with the novel that they decided to dedicate their discovery to the author,

⁷⁰ Insko, ““All of Us Are Ahabs,”” 24.

⁷¹ Insko, ““All of Us Are Ahabs,”” 23.

Herman Melville, and give the creature its full scientific name of *Leviathan melvillei*.”⁷²

Exemplifying the spatial reach of the novel as cultural artifact, the international team of researchers comprises institutional affiliations ranging across five countries, none of which is the United States. Beyond such spatial expanse, this re-presentation of *Moby-Dick* additionally demonstrates the temporal aspect of the novel’s national unboundedness. As Matthiessen’s re-birth positions the nation to emerge from literature between its unfulfilled past and unachieved future and as the Melville revival constructs the author’s career narrative as past failure followed by future recovery, the narrative of this discovery recalls the sense of incompleteness that necessitates national reification. According to a news article on the publication of the discovery, the researchers “had speculated that such a fierce creature might once have existed on the basis of discoveries of individual teeth. Now, the discovery of the skull means that the Leviathan is not merely the stuff of myth and legend.”⁷³ Having lapsed into the obscurity of extinction, the species awaited its own rediscovery, and in finding the skull, the researchers fulfilled the narrative, and the Leviathan emerged not as the fantasy of myth and legend but as reality. The discovery narrative thus re-presents the final consummation that remains perpetually out of reach for both the novel and the nation.

Moreover, the original genus name chosen for the species, *Leviathan*, was later revealed to have been already in use, inducing the researchers to revise their report. In a corrigendum to their original report, Olivier Lambert et al. write, “The genus name *Leviathan*, proposed in this Letter for a new fossil physeteroid from the Miocene of Peru, is preoccupied by *Leviathan* Koch, 1841, a junior subjective synonym of *Mammut* Blumenbach, 1799. We propose here a

⁷² Pallab Ghosh, “‘Sea monster’ whale fossil unearthed.”

⁷³ Ghosh, “‘Sea monster.’”

replacement name *Livyatan* gen. nov. The type species is placed in this genus to form the binomial *Livyatan melvillei*.⁷⁴ It is noteworthy that in this revision, Lambert et al. moved from the Biblical “Leviathan” to the older Hebrew “Livyatan,” replicating the temporal dislocation accomplished by the Whale as national representative. In a section of the revised report explaining the researchers’ choice in name appears a version of Melville’s prefatory material: “Etymology. From Hebrew ‘Livyatan’ (‘Leviathan’ in Latin); name applied to large marine monsters in popular and mythological stories. Species is dedicated to novelist Herman Melville (1819–1891).”⁷⁵ As Melville establishes the overwhelming primacy of the figure of the Whale in his “Etymology” section, Lambert et al., too, invoke the omnipresence of the Whale, collapsing author into literary work: here, “novelist Herman Melville” stands in for his novel. Furthermore, in the choice to name the species after Melville and neither *Moby-Dick* nor Moby Dick, Lambert et al. additionally collapse author into Whale. The enormity of the Whale thus encompasses animal, author, novel, and nation, variously breaching the surface here as the representative of one and there as another, exemplifying the flexibility and dynamism of *Moby-Dick* as cultural artifact.

The third and final characteristic of *Moby-Dick* as cultural artifact, intertwined with its unbounded expanse and flexible, dynamic portability, is the democratizing nature of its availability for re-presentation. For Buell, this quality helps to explain the novel’s GAN status: “[T]he GAN idea itself is and has always been more a demotic than an academic enthusiasm. Books that accrue GAN charisma inevitably get appropriated in discrepant ways *Moby-Dick* is conspicuous although not unique in provoking such mutiny, readerly hijackings that are

⁷⁴ Olivier Lambert et al., “Corrigendum to ‘The giant bite of a new raptorial sperm whale from the Miocene epoch of Peru,’” 1134.

⁷⁵ Olivier Lambert et al., “The giant bite of a new raptorial sperm whale from the Miocene epoch of Peru,” 105.

orthogonal, even antithetical, to ‘established’ interpretations.”⁷⁶ The expansive availability of *Moby-Dick* as cultural artifact produces a similarly expansive accessibility, opening the novel up to readings beyond the scope of the audience of the novel as literary artifact, the audience of the book’s literal text, and thus enacts the sense of omnipresence: canonical literature such as those works of GAN status may seem, like culture, to be everywhere at once, diffuse and dissolved into the air, because their appropriations and re-presentations saturate the larger cultural context with the works as cultural artifacts, as culture themselves.

The dynamism of readers’ engagements with the novel, which may or may not include readings of the literal text, produces the omnipresence of *Moby-Dick* by perpetuating the maintenance of its canonicity. Through the creation of readership communities via the “complex evaluative feedback loop” traced by Smith, “we make texts timeless by suppressing their temporality”: “what may be spoken of as the ‘properties’ of the work ... are not fixed, given, or inherent in the work ‘itself’ but are at every point the variable products of some subject’s interaction with it. ... To the extent that any aspect of a work is recurrently constituted in similar ways by various subjects at various times, it will be because the subjects who do the constituting ... are themselves similar.”⁷⁷ The novel’s re-presentation in the form of the annual *Moby-Dick* Marathon illustrates the democratizing availability of the cultural artifact and in turn demonstrates that when it comes to the canonicity of the work, “[n]othing endures like endurance.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Buell, *The Dream*, 387. For a similar take, see Insko, “‘All of Us Are Ahab,’” 22.

⁷⁷ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 24, 28, 27.

⁷⁸ Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” 29.

Each year, the city of New Bedford, Massachusetts, hosts an annual marathon reading of *Moby-Dick*, “a nonstop, twenty-five-hour immersion in Melville’s novel.”⁷⁹ In the case of this re-presentation, the effect of the omnipresent Whale is something like that of a séance. As David Dowling describes it, “The chorus of voices brings out the living human bonds contained within the text. By making the novel come alive in an active reading, *Moby-Dick* and Melville himself are reanimated and reified.”⁸⁰ Melville and his novel, incorporated as they are by the figure of the Whale, are reanimated by virtue of the democratizing availability of the novel as cultural artifact; a diverse community of readers accesses, recites, and re-produces *Moby-Dick* each year, “function[ing] as a vessel for the palpitating spirit of Melville.”⁸¹ In describing this reanimation as a reification, Dowling seems to imply that Melville and *Moby-Dick* are actually made more real in this re-presentation than they were in their own time, recalling the unfulfilled potentiality, the sense of incompleteness, that motivates the fantasy of representation.

The national unboundedness, flexibility and dynamism, and democratizing availability that, as I have argued, characterize the dissemination of canonical literature enable the circulation of a literary work as cultural artifact, the circulation of the idea of the novel rather than of the novel itself. Unbound from its literal text, the idea of the novel becomes available for re-presentations that manifest the cultural meaning of the literary work. The dissemination of canonical literature as cultural artifact distances the meaning of the work from its literal text as we have seen with regard to re-presentations of *Moby-Dick*, wherein Melville’s novel is distilled to the primacy of the Whale. As the dissemination of canonical literature distances cultural

⁷⁹ David Dowling, “Introduction: Melville Lives,” in *Chasing the White Whale: The Moby-Dick Marathon; or, What Melville Means Today*, 1. Having not yet had the opportunity to attend the Marathon myself, my analysis of this re-presentation is reliant on Dowling’s account of his experience at the 2009 Marathon.

⁸⁰ Dowling, “Introduction: Melville Lives,” 6.

⁸¹ Dowling, “Introduction: Melville Lives,” 2.

meaning from the confines of the literal text, the problem of representation surges to the fore: the culturally representative element of the work, its manifestations as cultural artifact, is divorced from the literary work that was itself supposedly representative of its cultural context, illustrating that cultural meaning is made out of readers' interactions with the work and not out of the work itself. Cultural representativeness is thus not inherent to the work, housed within its pages and passively awaiting discovery, but must rather be generated by communities of readers who may or may not have literally read the work.

The culturally representative object of study, then, lies not within a literary work as such but rather in the dynamism of the work's relationship to culture, that is, in the repetitive production of cultural significance by readers. This replication of cultural significance in turn replicates the formation of readership communities who receive the work as significant and, perpetuating the evaluative cycle, assert and maintain the work's canonicity—its incorporation into culture, into our sense of ourselves, and its dissemination as culture. What this investigation into the circulation of canonical literature reveals is that despite the impulse to answer the anxiety of cultural legitimacy through the production of representative literature, it is not a literary work but rather its readers who generate the cultural meaning of the nation in order to fill the perceived void, and their production of cultural meaning is enabled by canonicity's transubstantiation of the literature-culture relationship, which frees the work to circulate not merely as cultural rather than literary artifact and not merely as representative of cultural meaning but, ultimately, as culture itself.

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