

**“Some men ride on such space”:**

**Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael*, the Melville Revival, and the American  
Baroque**

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*Call Me Ishmael*, Charles Olson’s 1947 study of Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*, is an anomalous book. On the one hand, it is a foundational text of Melville Studies, establishing Melville as an American Shakespeare and helping to solidify Melville’s elevated position in a canon of American literature.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, *Call Me Ishmael* also offers a bizarre recasting of Melville’s entire *oeuvre*, transforming the image of the nineteenth-century writer at a moment in which early practitioners of American Studies were consolidating a specifically “national imaginary” with respect to literature and history. *Call Me Ishmael* is simultaneously a key document of an emerging American Studies and a proleptic critique of the nationalist project of the disciplinary field. Blurring the lines between literary artist and scholarly critic, Olson sought to rethink Melville’s leviathan by reimagining Melville’s own imaginative reshaping of the world system in

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1851. Olson accomplishes this in part by establishing Melville's literary and historical project as a discrete segment of a grand, 3,000-year exploration of time and space. Olson thereby wrenches the author from the hands of a nascent American Studies, whose practitioners were in this process of enshrining Melville as the central figure in a national program coded as the American Renaissance, and Olson projects a baroque Melville not confined to or emblematic of any nationalist cultural project.

In this essay I look at Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* in the context of the Melville Revival and the academic canonisation of Melville in the emergent field of American Studies, particularly as associated with an imagined American Renaissance. Olson arguably occupied significant positions in both movements. Through his early interest in Melville, Olson came of age during the Melville Revival of the 1920s and 1930s. He befriended Melville's granddaughters, Eleanor Melville Metcalf and Frances Osborne, who gave him access to a wealth of material, including Melville's own set of Shakespeare volumes, with which Olson was able to develop so much of his own argument. And, as a student of Perry Miller, among others, in the newly established History of American Civilization program at Harvard University, Olson stood at a ground zero of the nascent field of American Studies. There Olson worked closely with F.O. Matthiessen, who would effectively christen the new discipline by publishing *American Renaissance* in 1941, a book that explicitly acknowledged Olson's assistance. Thus, Olson could be viewed an important figure of both the Revival and the Renaissance, Melville Studies and American Studies, but in his 1947 study of the great American novel Olson provided a reading of Melville that effectively frees the author from the ideological uses to which these movements put him. In Olson's reading, Melville is

neither a modernist aesthete nor a representative American. Olson imagines a postmodern and postnational *Moby-Dick*, which is at once part of an extensive, global spatiotemporal project that, like baroque art, exceeds the limits of American Studies.

**“Beginner—and interested in beginnings”: An Introduction**

Olson’s 1947 *Call Me Ishmael* somehow manages to take part in the national project of American Studies and to undermine it at the same time, and this eccentric study of Melville still resonates today, after “the American Century.”<sup>2</sup> Following the Melville Revival in the 1920s, which elevated the awareness of Melville’s work and canonised *Moby-Dick* in particular as an American masterpiece, a widespread industry of Melville criticism and scholarship emerged. Although the early interventions of Raymond Weaver, Van Wyck Brooks, Carl Van Doren, Lewis Mumford, and others laid a substantial groundwork, one might say that academic criticism on Melville did not really begin in earnest until the publication of F.O. Matthiessen’s landmark *American Renaissance* in 1941, which, despite both the author’s own intentions and the subtitle’s declaration of its purported topic (“Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman”), did much to establish Melville as the representative writer of the era and nation. Into this arena comes Olson, with a foot in each camp as it were, as he represented both the lay-scholar or fan of Melville and an academic researcher whose work with Matthiessen and Perry Miller helped to shape the emerging field of American Studies. Olson’s boldly revisionary reading of Melville, at a moment in which Melville’s legend is only beginning to be composed and disseminated, simultaneously refined and transformed Melville Studies. But, unlike the majority of his contemporaries and those that followed closely in their

wake, Olson recognised that Melville was not really the representative of an American Renaissance, but something else: an American Baroque.

After declaring that “SPACE” is the “central fact to man born in America” and spelling it large “because it comes large here,”<sup>3</sup> Olson maintains that Melville “rode” on such space, rather than settling in or fastening himself to it. In Olson’s innovative interpretation, Melville’s writings are like the baroque paintings and buildings described by the art historian Henri Focillon in *The Life of Forms in Art*, which “tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become one with all its possibilities.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike the renaissance’s careful and beautiful ordering of space, the baroque work of art appears as a grotesque, ornate, and above all excessive art, one that transgresses the limits of the frame and ventures into the space beyond. In reading Melville, Olson grappled with such space as well, and the baroque text seems particularly apt for an age that Olson named “post-modern,” the era of globalisation, in which the suppression of distance made possible by ever more advanced forms of media, communications, and travel technologies has not dulled the acute spatial anxiety sometimes associated with the postmodern condition. Olson, who after all who coined the term “post-modern,” is not interested in promoting the American Renaissance celebrated by many of his contemporaries, but rather in what comes after, the messier, more complex, and altogether more interesting condition of what I have called the American Baroque.<sup>5</sup> The baroque Melville made visible in Olson’s study becomes an alternative to the national avatar of the American Renaissance, and a proleptic representative of our own, postmodern condition.

With *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson considered how Melville not only responded to the world of 1851, but projected a kind of cosmological vision in which art and experience blended together in a project of mapping a world, as well as exploring other possible worlds. As Olson observes pointedly, Melville was a “Beginner—and interested in beginnings,” a thinker who “had a way of reaching back through time until he got history pushed back so far that he turned time into space.”<sup>6</sup> This manipulation of time and space is characteristic of Melville’s baroque vision. In *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson blurred the lines between artist and critic, and between writer and reader, in order to show how *Moby-Dick* participated in a seemingly national project while transcending, or rather transgressing, its aesthetic and national limits in order to fashion a global narrative, or worldwide representation that, as Melville puts it in *Moby-Dick*, might actually encompass “the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs.”<sup>7</sup> In the process, Olson cartwheels along a tight rope between the nascent but swiftly developing American Studies and a proleptically postnational or postmodern condition that allows both Melville and Olson to escape the restrictively nationalist literary tradition in formation and to explore alternative trajectories.

In this way, Olson wrests Melville from the hands of an American Studies that would establish him as its spokesman and as the emblematic figure of an American Renaissance, and projects a baroque Melville whose extravagance guides him beyond the circles of this imagined world, into worlds still to be imagined. Participating in the later phase of the Melville Revival, Olson also anticipates the misuses to which Melville’s

work will be put by the nationalist critics of the Cold War era, and definitively situates Melville in a global and broadly historical project. Rather than arguing for Melville's place in an emerging American literature, Olson regards Melville as the latest incarnation of a primordial, yet historically and geographically embodied, force: the power of "search" itself. That is, not the quest whose aim is discovery, but the unmediated and extravagant transgression in its own right. As Olson once put it in a letter to Robert Creeley: "my assumption is any POST-MODERN is born with the ancient confidence that, he *does* belong. So, there is nothing to be *found*. There is only [...] search."<sup>8</sup>

### **"The Melville people are rare people": From Revival to Renaissance**

According to an old joke among American literature scholars, Melville Studies replaced whaling as New England's largest industry.<sup>9</sup> But the ascendancy of Melville and his writings to a place of honour in the literary canon, especially among academic critics, was not inevitable. "In 1900," as David R. Shumway has pointed out, "*Moby-Dick* would not have been recognised by many as American literature; those who did recognise it as such would not have accorded it a privileged position."<sup>10</sup> Melville's fame waxed and waned throughout his lifetime, from his early celebrity as "the man who lived among the cannibals," a label he complained bitterly about in a famous letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne,<sup>11</sup> to his relative anonymity and obscurity in later life. Although his 1891 death occasioned a small flurry of interest, the Melville Revival can be said to have begun only with the centennial celebration of Melville's birth in 1919, along with Raymond Weaver's 1921 biography *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic*, as well as the publication of "Billy Budd" in 1924, which provided the additional boost of a "new"

work by a “classic” American writer.<sup>12</sup> The Melville Revival restored, or perhaps for the first time promoted, the writer to a central place in American literary discourse. However, as Shumway’s “genealogy of American literature as an academic discipline” makes clear, it is not only the visibility of an author’s work or having that author’s books back in print that makes one a canonical presence, but also the interplay of various institutional forces which will shape the dissemination and reception of the cultural artifacts.<sup>13</sup> Between the initial Melville Revival of the 1920s and the canonisation, or perhaps hypercanonisation, of Melville by the 1950s,<sup>14</sup> the energies of the Revival had to translate into a kind of national renaissance. These forces, in no small part, were conveniently set in motion by a monumental scholarly treatise named *American Renaissance*, as well as by others that followed, and these important works helped to establish and were themselves sustained by a new academic discipline, American Studies. Olson, who was only ten years old when Weaver’s biography appeared and who was still a graduate student when Matthiessen’s field-establishing study went to press, turns out to have been a crucial, albeit mysterious, figure in the process of Melville’s canonisation and in the advent of American Studies.

In a definitive, if provocative, history of the Melville Revival, *Hunting Captain Ahab*, Clare L. Spark notes that the principal actors involved in promoting Melville and his writings had diverse agendas. Many were deliberately reacting to political and cultural debates that bore little direct relation to the work of a mid-nineteenth-century romance writer and poet. Frequently, this cultural work by early practitioners of American Studies involved disputes between various factions of left-wing radicals, populist progressives, and cultural conservatives. As Melville’s work became a dominant

touchstone for these debates, the character Ahab in particular emerged as a Protean shape-shifter, transmogrifying from the Shakespearean tragic hero to the Byronic romantic one and then into a Hitler- or Stalin-like dictator, all within a few years. Referring to these often conflicting interests, Spark demonstrates that the “Melville Revival, then, is only tangentially about the author of *Moby-Dick*.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, as William V. Spanos has observed with some irony, the modernist sensibilities of those critics involved in the Melville Revival informed their decisions in canonising Melville, and *Moby-Dick* in particular.<sup>16</sup> That is, Melville was less valued as a representative author of his own time, than as a proto-modernist whose wealth of allusions, diversity of materials, and complexity of style made his work both more worthy and in greater need of critical treatment. Where some readers, like Fred Lewis Pattee, would disqualify Melville precisely because his baroque narratives lay outside of the mainstream of American civilisation, the “early criers” of Melville, as Olson calls them, embraced Melville in part *because* of his eccentricity with respect to the purported literary or cultural tradition. Paradoxically, then, Melville’s centrality to an emerging American literary canon was based on precisely the same criteria that would have previously disqualified him: namely, the extravagance that made Melville and *Moby-Dick* so unrepresentative of the cultural norms of his own time.

For example, Carl Van Doren made a virtue of *Moby-Dick*’s unpopularity, stating that it was “too irregular, too bizarre” for the popular audience, but that its “immense originality” warrants its inclusion among the great romances of world literature.<sup>17</sup> As Spanos puts it, “[t]he Modernist revival [...] chose to celebrate precisely that differential speculative extravagance of style, form, and content which, in the eyes of Melville’s early

critics, interrupted the promise latent in the documentary veracity of his first romances and disqualified him from a place in the emergent American canon.”<sup>18</sup> In a ruse of history or dialectical reversal, the biographical critics of the Melville Revival established Melville as a powerful national icon by virtue of his distance from the everyday life of the nation’s people. That is, unlike narratives more engaged with matters of national importance—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance—*Moby-Dick* did not address such timely controversies directly, but transcended them to establish a kind of individual, mythic, and essentially “American” spirit. “This shift in evaluative emphasis from ‘low’ to ‘high’ culture resulted in the apotheosis of *Moby-Dick* not simply as Melville’s ‘masterpiece’ but as an American ‘masterpiece’.”<sup>19</sup> In sum,

The Melville revival inaugurated by such biographers and critics as Raymond Weaver, John Freeman, Van Wyck Brooks, and Lewis Mumford was not, in other words, simply a revival of interest in Melville; it was also an ideological victory over the problematic of a previous generation of critics. It went far, if not the whole way (a project fulfilled by the next generation of Americanists), to reverse the judgment of the earlier critics, without, however, disturbing the *logos* informing the earlier representation of American’s cultural identity and its canon. These critics of the revival apotheosized *Moby-Dick* as an American masterpiece because it intuited and expressed an essentially *human* “spiritual” Real that, in its integral and universal comprehensiveness, transcended the ideological partiality [...] of American sociopolitical existence.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the “next generation of Americanists” would include Olson himself. However, given his eccentric reading of *Moby-Dick* and his declaration of a “post-modern” condition, Olson would hardly be representative of the burgeoning field of American Studies as it came into its institutional form in the 1950s and 1960s.

The establishment of Melville’s proto-modernist and canonical credentials during the Melville Revival was not uncontested. As Shumway has discussed, the profoundly elitist perspective of a Van Doren was vigorously countered by other critics, including Fred Lewis Pattee, who “reflects an older, populist conception of the canon.”<sup>21</sup> Pattee took issue with the enshrinement of relatively minor literary figures, writers—like Melville, in fact—who did not register much popular success in their own time and who therefore could not be said to be particularly representative of the American spirit. Indeed, Pattee was repulsed by the critical attention given to such authors and their works at the expense of bestsellers like *Little Women*. “Melville, I prophesy, will wane back to the fifth magnitude to which his own generation adjudged him.”<sup>22</sup> Notwithstanding Pattee’s unfulfilled prophesy, the initial successes of the Melville Revival on the 1920s and 1930s did not assure Melville’s canonicity or lasting influence in American Studies. That would require the academic institutionalisation of Melville Studies, and Olson himself would function as something of a bridge between the early Melville enthusiasts like Weaver and Van Doren and the more rigorously academic critics like Matthiessen, Henry Nash Smith, Perry Miller, Richard Chase, and others who followed in that line, most of whom may not have been what might be called “Melville people.”

Olson says that “[t]he Melville people are rare people,” curiously and pointedly in “A note of thanks” placed a good third of the way into *Call Me Ishmael*, rather than in a more traditional “Acknowledgements” section, which is, for instance, where Matthiessen explicitly thanks Olson for his contributions to *American Renaissance*. As if to highlight this eccentric decision further, Olson’s “rare people” sentence continues by noting that “this is the right place to tell”; then Olson’s lists the names of those “Melville people” deserving of his gratitude.<sup>23</sup> This placement may well be fitting, insofar as it introduces a section of Olson’s study devoted most thoroughly to Melville’s personally owned, physical books, a section in which Olson analyses some of Melville’s handwritten marginal notations and underlining in his texts. Hence, Olson places his acknowledgements to Melville’s family in close proximity, literally, to the argument derived from the fruits of their generosity. However, in addition to thanking Eleanor Melville Metcalf, Henry K. Metcalf, and “another granddaughter, Mrs. Frances Osborne,” Olson also thanks Weaver, Henry A. Murray, Jr., and “those early criers of Melville,” Van Doren and Brooks.<sup>24</sup> That is, Olson’s list of “Melville people” includes not only his personal relatives, but biographers, critics, and “early criers,” an extended family or perhaps a (not so?) secret society or guild, well suited to summoning a special presence previously absent. The Melville Revival, as Spanos and others have observed, was not simply a rediscovery of an unjustly forgotten writer, but an almost incantatory, mystical, Promethean rebirth-through-resurrection. Although it may at first seem to be a rebirth of one author in particular, the Melville Revival was actually part of a collective project of renaissance that heralded and made possible the invention of an “American Renaissance.”

Even if he had not written a word on Melville himself, Olson's contribution to this emerging field would have been immense, given the value of his initial research. As Spark points out, "[h]ad he chosen, Olson could have dominated Melville studies, for he had the support of important allies in American letters (besides the devoted friendship of [Melville's granddaughter] Eleanor Metcalf and her family)."<sup>25</sup> By contacting Melville's granddaughters, he was able to gain access to Melville's own library, which in turn allowed him to analyse handwritten marginalia in those volumes that Melville read and reread with such intensity. Such marginal notations became the source of Olson's groundbreaking essay on Melville and Shakespeare, which also forms the central section of *Call Me Ishmael*. Matthiessen himself acknowledged what a tremendous boon to his own scholarship this research had been, and Matthiessen expresses gratitude for "Olson's generosity in letting me make use of what he has tracked down in his investigation of Melville's reading."<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Olson's contributions to the academic study of Melville's work and to the processes of consolidating the author's reputation within American literature are perhaps ultimately less interesting than his astonishing, creative interpretations of *Moby-Dick* in *Call Me Ishmael*. This text also envisions a Melville quite different from the canonical figure established in Cold War-era American Studies.

Originally based in part on an M.A. thesis and drafted in connection with his Ph.D. research in Harvard University's History of American Civilization program, a ground zero of the coming disciplinary field of American Studies, *Call Me Ishmael* is a book whose rigorous scholarly research is evident on every page. But it is also a bewilderingly poetic and freewheeling work, juxtaposing Freudian theories (especially drawing from Freud's late, hence recent,<sup>27</sup> book, *Moses and Monotheism*) with Frederick

Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis," mixing mythology with history, and scientific data with pure, fanciful speculation. As James Zeigler has pointed out, the book was not initially well-received by established authorities of American Studies, though it was reviewed favorably in non-academic journals,<sup>28</sup> and the tension between the older, biographical tradition and the new, more aesthetically minded and academic criticism is visible at times in the pages of *Call Me Ishmael*. Coming out of the Melville Revival himself, Olson makes his own entry into the discourse of the American Renaissance, which really took flight, not so much with Matthiessen's 1941 title, which was one crucial launching pad to be sure, as with the academic domestication of Melville by a more formalised American Studies in the 1950s, as represented by those whom Donald E. Pease has referred to as "Cold War critics."<sup>29</sup> This American Studies went on to become a kind of secular (and sometimes, not-so-secular) religion for many practitioners and devotees. But despite its role as a catalyst in sparking further academic study of Melville and what came to be the field of American Studies, Olson's bizarre little book also goes well beyond this modern renaissance, as Olson takes Melville with him on a baroque exploration of postmodern American, or perhaps post-American, space.

### **"I take SPACE to be the central fact": From Renaissance to Baroque**

Olson's notorious beginning to *Call Me Ishmael* announces a matter of "fact," as he calls it, while also establishing a new way of thinking: Using all-capital-letters for the keyword of the entire study, Olson writes: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy." As he continues, Olson quickly extends the spatiotemporal

scope of his study from the national to the continental and then global: “[i]t is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning. [...] Something else than a stretch of earth—seas on both sides, no barriers to contain as restless a thing as Western man was becoming in Columbus’ day.”<sup>30</sup> After thus establishing the terrain on which his investigation will take place, Olson suggests a fundamental opposition at the heart of the American experience: “Some men ride on such space, others have to fasten themselves like a tent stakes to survive. As I see it, Poe dug in and Melville mounted. They are the alternatives.”<sup>31</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment whether the nomadic, peripatetic Edgar Allan Poe really did “dig in” and fasten himself to this space, one might say that the key to Olson’s reading of Melville lies in this alternative: Melville did not dig in, but “rode” on such space. For Olson, everything about Melville’s literary project involves aspects of “riding” this space. So, for example, “Melville went to space to probe and find man,” and “Melville had a way of reaching back through time until he got history pushed back so far he turned time into space.”<sup>32</sup> This space-riding, this pushing back of time until it becomes space, is in no way a sense of rebirth. Olson, writing just a few years after *American Renaissance*, already disputes the notion that Melville takes part in such a project of national renaissance. Even Matthiessen was wary of the term, and Harry Levin was apparently responsible for *American Renaissance*’s title; Matthiessen had wanted to call the book *Man in the Open Air*, “after an apt phrase in Whitman,” but the publisher desired a title that was more “descriptively categorical.”<sup>33</sup> Although Matthiessen conceded that “re-birth” was not really the best term for the literary movement of

Melville's day, the word *renaissance* stuck, both in the field of American Studies and in university course catalogues around the country.

Matthiessen was well aware that the word *renaissance* was a loaded term. As Jonathan Arac has pointed out, “[e]ver since the historiographic notion was elaborated by Michelet and Burckhardt—in 1845 and 1860, exactly bracketing Matthiessen’s period—‘renaissance’ has carried with it a glamorous freight of secularism, progress, and preeminent individuality.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the notion of an American renaissance fit neatly into a larger national narrative, one developed during the nineteenth century and extrapolated in the twentieth by practitioners of American Studies.<sup>35</sup> Against his own wishes, perhaps, Matthiessen’s label helped establish a profoundly nationalist enterprise, even though Matthiessen, who was among other things a Shakespeare scholar, was deeply committed to a comparative or international approach to literary studies. As Arac notes with irony, “Matthiessen’s title promoted a euphoria of America that gained power against the grain of his own methodological precepts and critical practice. [...] American studies has not followed Matthiessen’s precept or practice, even while drawing its warrant to exist from him.”<sup>36</sup> Applied to the rhetoric of an intensifying cultural nationalism in the nineteenth-century United States, and employed as part of the rhetoric of a post-war and Cold War nationalism in the mid-twentieth century, the term *renaissance*, with its uniformly positive or even celebratory nuances, becomes a vote of approval for a nationalist literary project.

By the mid-twentieth-century, the phrase carried an almost evangelical meaning, as the study of American literature comes to be associated with the proselytising mission of transmitting American ideals and values to the rest of the world. For example, Leo

Marx has recounted the story, as told to him by the British critic Richard Hoggart, of an enthusiastic young scholar in the emerging field of “American Studies” in the 1950s:

“And what is *that*?” Hoggart had asked. “An exciting new field of interdisciplinary teaching and research.” “What is *new* about that?” “It combines the study of history and literature.” “In England we’ve been doing that for a long time,” Hoggart protests. “Yes,” said the eager Americanist, “but *we* look at American society as a whole—the entire culture, at *all* levels, high and low.” But Hoggart, who was about to publish his groundbreaking study of British working-class culture—*The Uses of Literacy* (1957)—remained unimpressed. After a moment, in a fit of exasperation, his informant blurted out: “But you don’t understand, I *believe* in America!”

At this point, Marx explains, Hoggart understood completely just what the young man meant, although he also noted that no British scholar would ever be heard saying, “I believe in Britain!”<sup>37</sup> The “American Century,” as Henry Luce optimistically named it in *Life Magazine* in 1941 (the same year that *American Renaissance* was published), required and received a disciplinary field worthy of its ideological mission. The nationalist literary project formed the basis for a well nigh religious “belief in America,” for good or for ill, inherent in the discourse of American Studies as the field took shape in the immediate post-World War II years. As I have suggested elsewhere, such religiously functioning belief-system is still visible in the discourse of new Americanists, even those

quite critical of the discipline, in the present era.<sup>38</sup> Notwithstanding the secularism implied by the term, who does not believe in a renaissance? Who opposes renaissance or rebirth? It is almost universally valued.

This is not so with the term *baroque*, which since its original coinage has almost always carried with it a somewhat negative connotation. Originally a jeweler's term referring to "a rough or imperfect pearl" (a lovely epithet, perhaps, for both *Moby-Dick* and Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*), the word *baroque* was applied to the arts at least as early as 1765, and it was not used as a term of praise. As René Wellek relates, "[i]n the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the adjective 'baroque' was widely used as an equivalent of 'bizarre,' and the noun 'baroque' became established as a term for 'bad taste' in architecture."<sup>39</sup> By the late nineteenth century, German historiography had consolidated the meaning of the term, bestowing upon it an inherent sense of artistic decadence, specifically with respect to the period during which the unity of Renaissance art and architecture seemed to disintegrate. Heinrich Wölfflin, in his 1888 study *Renaissance and Baroque*, a book which effectively standardised the use of the term, wrote that "[i]t has become customary to use the term *baroque* to describe the style into which the Renaissance resolved itself or, as it is more commonly expressed, into which the Renaissance degenerated."<sup>40</sup> Such usage would be expanded to encompass any period of aesthetic decadence; however, the *baroque* largely remained associated with, and unfavorably contrasted to, the *renaissance*. Whereas the renaissance calls to mind formal ingenuity, rules, models, science and progress, the baroque is defined by excess, extravagance, anarchy, and ridiculousness. "Unlike the Renaissance, the baroque style is not accompanied by theoretical rules: it developed without models."<sup>41</sup> The relative

formlessness of baroque productions, or perhaps more so the inscrutability of the baroque forms, underscored the negative impression of the baroque in general. Although the term no longer refers to “bad taste” *per se* by the late nineteenth century, *baroque* still carried an unfavourable connotation, if not denotation. “As an art-historical term *baroque* has lost its suggestion of the ridiculous,” writes Wölfflin, “but its general use it still carries a suggestions of repugnance or abnormality.”<sup>42</sup> The re-evaluation of the baroque by such twentieth-century critics as Walter Benjamin was less a change in definition as a change in attitude toward the excesses of the baroque, in which ornateness, complexity, difficulty, or extravagance become terms of approval rather than of opprobrium.<sup>43</sup> This revaluation of baroque excess was also part of the embrace of a modernist aesthetic, which contributed to the revaluation of Melville’s own work, and *Moby-Dick* in particular, during the Melville Revival, as I discussed earlier. Ironically, then, the modernist sensibilities of the “early criers” of Melville may have made them more likely to embrace the baroque extravagance of his work.

These characterisations of the baroque could apply to Olson’s view of *Moby-Dick*, including the study’s eccentric form, which might be said to reflect the novel’s own. Just as Van Doren had considered that the novel was “too bizarre” to be popular, a contemporary reviewer of *Moby-Dick* declared that the novel was “distressingly marred by an extravagant treatment of the subject.”<sup>44</sup> Not unlike the creators of baroque art and architecture, Melville (and Olson, too) tended to break the rules.

In language well suited to a discussion of Melville’s and Olson’s projects, the art historian Henri Focillon described the fundamental character of the baroque:

In the life of forms, the baroque is indeed but a moment, but it is certainly the freest and most emancipated one. Baroque forms have either abandoned or denatured that principle of intimate propriety, as essential aspect of which is a careful respect for the limits of the frame, especially in architecture. They live with passionate intensity a life that is entirely their own; they proliferate like some vegetable monstrosity. They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become one with all its possibilities. This mastery of space is pure delight to them.<sup>45</sup>

The surprisingly flexible contours and shattered frames visible in the form of *Moby-Dick* offer images of the baroque in Melville's text, but the content of the masterpiece also suggests how Melville "rides on" such space. Melville's delightful "mastery of space," in Olson's view, enables him to form a new conception of the Pacific, the liminal zone in which the wandering Western Civilization has become Eastern once again. In his conclusion to *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson asserts that the three great stories of the West are Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Commedia* (in which Odysseus, now consigned to Hell for his sins of deception, including the ruse of the Trojan Horse, recounts his further voyages west of the Pillars of Hercules and south of the equator), and Melville's own *Moby-Dick*, with its "full stop" in the Pacific.<sup>46</sup> Embarking upon an odyssey from the beaches of Troy, venturing through Hell and Heaven, and circumnavigating the globe to find the absolute limits well within one's own sense of space, this vision of ancient, modern, and

postmodern literary cartography forms the basis for Olson's interpretation of both Melville's writings and American civilisation in the mid-twentieth century.

Notwithstanding some of the imperial pomp of his language, Olson's Pacific, which he refers to as one of Melville's "inventions" in *Moby-Dick*, is not simply the American imperium extended westward towards Asia. As Zeigler has argued persuasively, Olson "anticipates the Pacific Ocean will become a kind of space of exchange between the U.S. and the nations of Asia until such national designations cease to signify the world's dominant political agencies."<sup>47</sup> Somewhat like C.L.R. James, who in his own magisterial book on Melville expressed his hope that "all the problems of nationality" would evanesce before 1970,<sup>48</sup> Olson's baroque Melville finds in the Pacific a pervasively postnational space. Thus, at the very moment when the Melville Revival gives way to an American Renaissance, which characterised a certain image of Melville and of *Moby-Dick* as paradigmatic representatives of a national literary tradition, Olson strikingly and yet subtly projects an alternative trajectory.

### **"The creative act of anticipation": From Baroque to the Future**

If, as Focillon would have it, baroque forms have no respect for the limits of the frame, then the extravagant work of Melville and of Olson, or of the Olson-Melville complex of *Call Me Ishmael*, is another testament to their baroque sensibilities. Etymologically—surely both Melville and Olson give us license to reflect on the origins of words, as they so often and so enthusiastically do—the word *extravagance* refers to a "wandering out of bounds" or movement across boundaries or limits. Such transgressive movement also characterises both Melville's art and Olson's vision of Melville's broader

project, one that graphs onto an even larger spatiotemporal projection which extends to the limits of the terraqueous globe and for some “3,000 years,” according to Olson.<sup>49</sup> Melville’s originality, and Olson’s, derive and expand outward from this overall project, whose genealogy Olson traces back to Homer.

In the closing pages of *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson discovers that Homer, with the figure of Odysseus in particular, had already begun to map the baroque spaces of Melville’s world, which is to say, our own. “Homer was an end of the myth world from which the Mediterranean began. But in Ulysses he projected the archetype of the West to follow. It was the creative act of anticipation.”<sup>50</sup> This anticipation or *prolepsis* registers that foresight and the headlong rush of Melville’s own baroque fiction. It is not only that Odysseus started the wandering, which was then taken up by others, eventually leading to a temporal end in some future postmodernity and a spatial end in the paradigmatically alternative zone of the Pacific, although it is that too. But it is also that the projection, beyond the boundaries of time and space and into new spatiotemporal territories, becomes for Olson “the central quality of the men to come: *search*.”<sup>51</sup>

Olson finds that there are three great odysseys that have successively established the collective *search* of postmodern man. The first is that of Odysseus, both within the seemingly vast but closed Mediterranean world and outwards, right to the very boundaries and ambiguous spaces of that world, as with Odysseus’ visit to the kingdom of the dead to speak with Tiresias, for instance. The second, with a familiar face, is the Ulysses of Dante’s *Inferno*, who could not “quench in myself the burning wish to know the world” and who “set out on the deep and open sea,”<sup>52</sup> west past the Pillars of Hercules and into the Atlantic—as Olson reminds us, Plato’s philosophical cartography had

located Atlantis beyond those pillars—before sailing south past the equator, only to be swallowed up by the sea, much as the Pequod would ages later. This “Atlantic” Odysseus points to the figures of Columbus and the other explorers, eventually leading to Ahab, whose odyssey “lay around the Horn, where West returned to East,” and the endless quest for the setting sun’s horizon inexorably draws one toward yet another sunrise. For Olson, “Ahab is full stop,” the end of a 3,000-year project into the “UNKNOWN which Homer’s and Dante’s Ulysses opened men’s eyes to.”<sup>53</sup> But, of course, Olson does not really believe this, else he would not have given the final word or image to Proteus, whom Olson casts as the shape-shifting sea god. Flux, change, transgression, movement. Ahab’s “full stop” is Heraclitus’ river: never the same thing twice.

The originality of all this lies in a poetic resistance enacted in *Call Me Ishmael*. Olson’s book resists the ultimate stasis that American Studies and national literature would impose upon the baroque extravagance of *Moby-Dick*, and Olson refuses to read Melville’s novel as part of some nationalist mission, as with those interpretations that posit Ishmael as an “American Adam,” for example. But *Call Me Ishmael* goes further than merely exceeding the imagined borders of the United States; it enacts the grander, transnational or global projection of the ultimate power—*search* itself—disclosed in Olson’s revisionary analysis.

Despite the enthusiastic assertions of many mid-century Melville scholars in praise of the writer’s originality, the effect, and sometimes the intended effect, of their interpretations was to fix or freeze Melville’s originality into an identifiable “image repertoire” of American national narrative,<sup>54</sup> effectively discovering in *Moby-Dick*’s extravagant novel the all-too-familiar and well-worn pieties of the national culture. That

is, *Moby-Dick*'s eccentric and baroque forces are domesticated. For all of the rhetoric of movement in that nationalist literary ideology—such as the restless westering impulse that animates Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, for instance, but also the earlier national claims for Providential Manifest Destiny or a Puritan Errand into the Wilderness—the discourse and the practice of American Studies really celebrates settlers, not nomads, as the Turner thesis in the end makes clear. The American national narrative, and the disciplinary field that engenders and supports that narrative, relies on a people's relative immobility, on *not* moving, on sticking to a place and settling in for good. Despite the influence of his professor (and Turner acolyte) Frederick Merk, the Olson of *Call Me Ishmael* knew that “some men ride on such space” and do not simply plant their tent stakes in a suitably stable spot. Moreover, Olson knew that the stability of the place was itself illusory, and that the movement of such nomads as Melville and his “originals” is perpetual motion, radiating throughout space.

In a famous passage from *The Confidence-Man*, which Olson also cites, Melville asserts that there have only existed three truly “original characters” in world literature, and each comes from literary works of the seventeenth century, the historical epoch most directly associated with the baroque. The characters are the wandering Don Quixote, gloomy Hamlet, and the fiery Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The essence of their originality lies, for Melville, in the way each character affects everyone and everything else, projecting a world, a new creation, *genesis*: “the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all around it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it (mark how it is with Hamlet), so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin

to that which Genesis attends upon the beginning of things.”<sup>55</sup> This profound originality, or the “creative act of anticipation,” thus becomes a world-making, a baroque projection of that “SPACE” on which Melville rides.

Olson also grappled with such space, at a moment of great “moment” in U.S. and world history, with developments of the market and the postwar experience creating more complex international relations among workers of the world over an increasingly global space. The baroque power of Olson’s Melville seems to me particularly significant in the postnational era of globalisation, with its characteristically postmodern time-space compression and spatial anxiety.<sup>56</sup> If *search*, but not discovery, defined the situation of “post-modern” man for Olson, then the oscillatory, shifting constellations of the postmodern condition in the twenty-first-century world system call all the more urgently for a baroque art that may exceed the limits of the frame, in order to more effectively attempt to represent the seemingly unrepresentable totality of our present *Lebenswelt*. As with Melville’s own project in *Moby-Dick*, the baroque art of the present moment must strive to “manhandle this Leviathan,” to be “omnisciently exhaustive,” and to pursue its quarry “throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs.”<sup>57</sup> Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* represents an early, rather odd, attempt at bolstering the Melville Revival with a novel interpretation, while also retrieving Melville’s baroque masterpiece from the sanctimony and triumphalism of the American Renaissance. In its own post-war and early Cold-War emergence, *Call Me Ishmael* sounded a strange alarm, both celebratory and foreboding, which today hits the ear as starkly melodious music, a fugue that anticipates new refrains. Or, one might say that such baroque excess and eccentricity makes more sense today, with a postnational world system whose formerly reliable

coordinates are so frequently called into question by navigators on its shifting, open seas. Olson's baroque Melville in *Call Me Ishmael* thus re-emerges, with even greater urgency than in its own time, as a vital force within a post-American Studies for the twenty-first century.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of Melville as an “American Shakespeare” was initially suggested by Melville himself, in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” in which he compares “Nathaniel of Salem” to “William of Avon” and asserts that, “if Shakespeare has not been equalled, he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born” (245–246). But Olson’s study was among the first to recognise and to highlight the connections between Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Shakespeare, which in turn influenced F.O. Matthiessen (who acknowledges Olson’s valuable assistance in *American Renaissance*) among many others later.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Rowe, ed., *Post-Nationalist American Studies*; Buell, “Are We Post-American Studies?”; and Pease and Weigman, eds., *Futures of American Studies*; see also my “Post-American Literature.”

<sup>3</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> See my *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*, especially 1–18.

<sup>6</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 456.

<sup>8</sup> See Maud, *Charles Olson’s Reading*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> See Brodhead, “Trying All Things,” 19.

<sup>10</sup> Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*, 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> See Melville, *Correspondence*, 193.

<sup>12</sup> It is not clear that “classic” is an appropriate term for Melville’s (or any American’s) writing, but D.H. Lawrence provocatively inserted the word into the title of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, which includes two chapters on Melville, one on *Typee* and *Omoo*, another on *Moby-Dick*. Lawrence’s book might thus be considered another early effort at canonizing Melville, although, like Olson, Lawrence takes a rather unconventional approach to his subject. See Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, especially 131–161.

<sup>13</sup> See Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*.

<sup>14</sup> On the idea of “hypercanonization,” see Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target*, especially 133–153.

<sup>15</sup> Stark, *Hunting Captain Ahab*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Spanos, *The Errant Art of ‘Moby-Dick’*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Van Doren, *The American Novel*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Spanos, *The Errant Art of ‘Moby-Dick’*, 16.

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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 16–17.
- <sup>21</sup> Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*, 188.
- <sup>22</sup> Pattee, “Review of *American Literature*,” 380.
- <sup>23</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 40.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Spark, *Hunting Captain Ahab*, 269.
- <sup>26</sup> Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, xviii.
- <sup>27</sup> The English translation of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1937) was published in 1939.
- <sup>28</sup> Ziegler, “Charles Olson’s American Studies,” 50–51.
- <sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Pease, “*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War,” 144.
- <sup>30</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 11.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>33</sup> See Matthiessen, vii; see also Levin, *The Power of Blackness*, vii–viii.
- <sup>34</sup> Arac, “F.O. Matthiessen,” 94.
- <sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Pease, “National Identities,” 3–5.
- <sup>36</sup> Arac, “F.O. Matthiessen,” 95.
- <sup>37</sup> Marx, “On Recovering the ‘Ur’ Theory of American Studies,” 120.
- <sup>38</sup> See my “‘Believing in America’: The Politics of American Studies in a Post-National Era.”
- <sup>39</sup> Wellek, *Concepts in Criticism*, 116.
- <sup>40</sup> Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, 15.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 55.
- <sup>44</sup> See Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 477.

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- <sup>45</sup> Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 58.
- <sup>46</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 119.
- <sup>47</sup> Ziegler, "Charles Olson's American Studies," 70–71.
- <sup>48</sup> James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, 2.
- <sup>49</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 117.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 117–118.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.
- <sup>52</sup> Dante, *Inferno* XXVI, lines 97, 100.
- <sup>53</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 118–119.
- <sup>54</sup> See Pease, "National Identities," 4.
- <sup>55</sup> Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 282; see also Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 66.
- <sup>56</sup> See Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 284–306.
- <sup>57</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 455–456.

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