

REAL

Yearbook of
Research in English and American Literature

General Editors

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The Historical and Political Turn in Literary Studies

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Cultures of Criticism:
Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Expressive
Individualism, and the New Historicism

If cultural practices and institutional formations generate characteristic ways of making sense of the world, this must also apply to the way in which the new historical criticism approaches cultural and literary history. In a familiar dialectic of insight and blindness, this new historicism has established innovative and ingenious ways of historicizing cultural material, but it has been completely disinterested in considering the cultural practices and historical contexts that shape its own interpretive procedure. In what follows, I want to address this problem in an argument consisting of three parts: In the first of these parts, I describe a new cultural practice emerging in the nineteenth century by dealing with a text that was one of the first and, seen from today's perspective, most powerful manifestations of this new practice, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The second part, employing a recently coined concept of cultural history that I find especially useful, describes this practice as an example of a newly emerging type and stage of individualism called expressive individualism; finally, the third part, in taking advantage of the freedom of linkage between different fields and discourses which the new historicism has opened up, proposes to explain the new historicism itself as another manifestation of this cultural practice, that is, as a radical form not of political criticism but, quite on the contrary, of expressive individualism.

I.

The history of American literature is also the history of the changing uses and functions of fiction. In the history of the American novel, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* signals an entirely new use of fiction. Until the writing of *Mardi*, Melville's career as a writer had been that of an author of sea novels in the mode of the adventure story, dealing somewhat ambivalently with the strained relations between a civilization regarded as hypocritical and an individual trying to escape from the restraints of that civilization. Then, as Richard Brodhead has shown in detail in his study

The School of Hawthorne, Melville's literary ambition and appetite for imaginary self-expansion began to grow. The development of Melville's writing from *Mardi* through *Moby-Dick* was propelled by the search for a new literary form which would allow him to assign to literature, and, more specifically, to fiction, an entirely new task: "What Melville is searching for, in these revisions, is a format that will open his work more directly to the workings of his mind. Wrenching free from obligations either to rehearse real experience or to spin a continuous story, this effort in *Mardi* is to make each chapter an independent mental occasion: a chance for him to address whatever occurs to him as vigorously as he can, for the sake of finding out what he might have to say on that topic, without becoming bound to continue it or any other line." (1986, 21) Strongly influenced by his wide-ranging reading and his enthusiastic encounter with the "giants" of world literature, Melville's literary ambitions grew in giant leaps: "It is at this time that Melville ... became so receptive to what literature's powerful forms can do. And it is here that this writer, for four years an author of sorts, began fiercely to aspire to be one of literature's giants and to do its great work anew." (Brodhead, *Essays*, 14) In this sense, *Mardi* stands at the beginning of an exploration of new possibilities of fiction: "The act of writing, Melville here came to believe, could have more interesting aims than to tell stories or rehearse experiences. More energetically pursued, writing could be a means of self-development ... a way to realize the potential of one's mind." (13) Melville set out to explore the potential of literature to rhetorically construct imaginary worlds and, in the process, to appropriate whole libraries of geographical, philosophical and literary knowledge in order to put himself in the center of this new universe of texts.

Melville's exemplary self-empowerment by means of fiction is most clearly illustrated by *Moby-Dick*. In his decision to go whaling, Ishmael seems to be driven by a mysterious and elusive phenomenon of almost metaphysical proportions, the "idea of the great whale himself" (7). But already in the first chapter of the novel, this suggestion of his motive is part of a playful proliferation of narrative stances and roles. Self-irony, playful distancing, and mock meditation are part of Ishmael's voice from the beginning. An all-pervasive joy of fabulation and linguistic gamesmanship dominates the text. While the first paragraph of the novel may still be seen as the melancholy meditation of a social outcast called Ishmael, the following passages become increasingly playful in their foregrounding of flamboyant speculation and unforeseen rhetorical linkages. What seems to be a whim of the world-weary Ishmael at first, is linked to "crowds of water-gazers" in the next paragraph, and in the following

paragraph to "thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries" (4). Once the narrator gets going, there seem to exist no limits to his flow of associations and imaginary link-ups in a high-spirited *tour de force* of linguistic self-expansion. In tendency, Melville thus connects Ishmael's quest with virtually every possible phenomenon or object and declares the whole world to be the proper subject of his novel. However, as any reader of the novel knows, this emphatic self-authorization has a paradoxical quality: On the one hand, it strengthens the authority of the narrator who uses a potentially infinite number of objects and signs for the purpose of his own self-empowerment by establishing himself as the person who is "world-hungry" and creative enough to connect them in new and meaningful ways; on the other hand, it is the very boundlessness of his intertextual linkages which undermines his own imperial claims as creator and "world-maker." Self-enhancement and self-deconstruction are thus closely related and constantly feed into each other.

As a result, Melville's self-empowerment by means of fiction also leads to a painful realization of the arbitrariness of his own literary mode of world-making. There are several possibilities to respond to this realization. Taking their point of departure from the book's struggle between epistemological promise and despair, critics have often described *Moby-Dick* as an exemplary case study for the (somewhat belated) arrival of a Romantic epistemology in the American novel – which, in turn, is seen as one of the enabling forces of a proto-modernist, symbolic mode of representation. In this familiar description of the book as an epistemological drama, Ahab takes center stage. His quest for metaphysical knowledge generates and drives the narrative, while his metaphysical despair raises him to the level of tragic hero on the model of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. For the stoic and fatalist Ishmael, the world provides welcome material for his games of imaginary expansion, for the Faustian quester Ahab it becomes a tantalizing provocation to which he responds with fits of monomania and rage. However, Ahab's hunger for metaphysical truth is presented ambivalently by Melville. On the one hand, his obsessive insistence creates a remarkable intensity which distinguishes Ahab from all other characters and gives him a heroic dimension. At the same time, it expresses an excess of purpose, a hunger for self-enhancement, in which every thing and every other human being is instrumentalized for Ahab's personal ambitions. In his determined, relentless quest for meaning, Ahab is the embodiment of an individual with imperial aspirations, an unwitting spokesman, as Wai-Chee Dimock has pointed out in a study of Melville's "poetics of individualism," for a politics of Manifest Destiny.

However, *Moby-Dick* cannot be equated with Ahab's views. Perhaps more than other Romantic writers, the democrat and proud American Melville also foregrounds the political costs of Ahab's self-authorization. Ahab is a rebel and tyrant at the same time, his relationship to his crew a study in regimes of power, which range from bribery to manipulation by almost hypnotic forms of rhetoric. In contrast, the common sailor Ishmael functions as a representative of democratic alternatives. While Ahab insists on the priority of self-realization over all other claims and does not hesitate to use his crew as an extension of his own self, the melancholy Ishmael retreats from the spleen of his own individuality into the democratic community of harpooners and sailors which presents something like an early multicultural utopia of a democratic, dehierarchized brotherhood. Obviously, the usefulness of the *Pequod* to function as metaphor for a new society lies in the possibility it offers to bring together a wide range of different regions, races, and cultures. Ishmael's decision to go to sea is thus not an escape from society but its reconstitution on a new basis. If the novel cannot be equated with Ahab's perspective, however, the same goes for Ishmael's. A view of the book as a new democratic utopia finds its limits in the strong presence of Ahab. Melville's suggestion to employ the fraternity of sailors as nucleus of a new form of democratic society is subverted by Ahab's hypnotic ability to reestablish a kind of feudal order on board of the *Pequod* and to manipulate the crew into following him in his own obsessive thirst for revenge even at the cost of self-destruction.

Politics thus shapes *Moby-Dick* in two ways. On the one hand, as Alan Heimert and others have shown, it forms an essential part of the endless chain of references to current events and contemporary cultural debates which the novel weaves into its linguistic play.¹ Where, on the other hand, one attempts to describe the political premises that underlie the novel's treatment of the possibilities and dangers of self-expansion, one encounters a liberalism which indulges in the promise of individual self-fulfillment and yet wants to retain the idea of a universal fraternity of mankind. But while this contradiction is usually not addressed in the political discourse of the period, one may claim that it is foregrounded by

1 Cf., for example, Charles H. Foster, "Something in Emblems: A Reinterpretation of *Moby-Dick*," Alan Heimert, "*Moby-Dick* and American Political Symbolism," Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America*, Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*, Larry Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance*, Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations. Race in the Making of American Literature*.

Melville in *Moby-Dick*. In Ahab's uncompromising individualism and Ishmael's attempt to escape his own eccentric individuality by submerging himself into an egalitarian community of sailors, two liberal versions of the relation between individual and society are confronted with each other in order to articulate a third, utopian one which emerges from a narrative technique of changing perspectives, that is, from an aesthetic mode of communication. The basis for the novel's effect, or, more precisely, its implied theory of effect, can be seen in a skillful movement back and forth between Ahab's heroic quest for meaning and Ishmael's playful acceptance of the endless supplementarity of meaning, in a carefully crafted strategy of changing perspectives which alternately provides and withdraws authority in order not to become arrested in either one of these perspectives. As one critic puts it: "The dialectical relationship between Ishmael and Ahab is the central structural principle of the quest in *Moby-Dick*." (Schulz, 1981, 317, m.t.) It would therefore work against the basic poetic principle of the novel to draw its meaning from the perspective of either one of its characters. Rather, as Horst Rutsch has shown recently in a Berlin dissertation on what he calls Melville's democratic poetics, the text is constantly reenergized by the movement between these alternate perspectives.

This "plural" mode of signification finds its equivalent on the level of representation, as is well known, in an almost "postmodern" combination of various types of discourse, generic modes, modes of representation, and intertextual references, in a mixture of mythic, epic, novelistic, dramatic and lyrical elements, as well as in a constant change of rhetorical levels.² Structurally, *Moby-Dick* is a novel that defies classification because it is in a state of constant proliferation not only on the paradigmatic level of metaphorical extension but also on the level of syntagmatic linkage and in its wealth of intertextual references. For a modernist reading, such defiance realizes an inherent potential of art to oppose cultural convention. Quite obviously, however, there are historically different and changing forms of how conventions can be subverted. In contrast to Hawthorne's skillful use of ambiguity, for example, Melville's procedure in *Moby-Dick* has a strikingly playful note. The novel describes the hunger for metaphysical knowledge not only as a source of despair but also as a source of creativity. The elusiveness and constant deferral of meaning provokes rage but also a sense of liberation, because it enables the individual to gain a new wealth of options of world-making and world-exploration. In fact, a closer look at the novel reveals that even the

2 On this point, see Schwab, 91.

meaning and narrative function of Ahab is not exhausted by his role as demonic and obsessed truth seeker. To be sure, his response to the epistemological drama enacted in the novel stands in marked contrast to the "ludic sensibility" of Ishmael. But despite the seriousness of his quest and the depth of his metaphysical despair, Ahab is also a very artificial construction, an intertextually constituted character, a man made of texts, that is, a powerful testimony to the creative powers of literary world-making.

Ahab's theatrical monologues which feature a language borrowed from Shakespearean tragedies in order to dramatize his tragic grandeur, draw attention to his function as merely another role player in the rich cast of *Moby-Dick*. In a little known but excellent interpretation of the book, Dieter Schulz emphasizes this dimension of Ahab: "What remains as the strongest impression, is ... his theatrical dimension. Because he is a man made up of borrowed language, intertextual references, and characteristics of other literary figures, Ahab is no longer a romantic truth-seeker; rather he *plays* the role of the romantic truth-seeker. His acts quote those of famous titanic questers of world literature and thus assume the added dimension of a pose. This, in fact, is one of the major effects and functions of the theatrical elements in *Moby-Dick*. The imitation of the typical gestures and the diction of the tragic hero in Shakespeare would be unbearable and aesthetically unsatisfactory, if it could not be read as expression of a person who has been transformed by his imitative obsession into a mere role ..." (325, m.t.)

As a literary figure, Ahab is something like a compendium of literary truth-seekers, a result of Melville's wide-ranging reading on literary questers and Faustian heroes. The unmistakable element of allegorical and theatrical excess in his characterization signals that his tragedy is staged (occasionally in an almost literal sense), that Melville has composed him out of a whole repertoire of literary roles in order not only to intensify the effects of his plight but, one can surmise, also out of a joy of fictional world-making and playful imaginary expansion.³ McIntosh stresses this doubleness of Ahab who functions as both a truth-seeker and an intertextual composite of literary figures: "Any engaged reader of *Moby-Dick* has a sense of what propels Ahab on his voyage: his rage against a heartless universe and the gods he imagines behind it; his effort

3 This same argument may also be applied to the white whale which, even more so than Ahab, derives a major part of its forceful presence in the novel from recurrent suggestions of metaphysical meaning. Ultimately, however, the whale remains an object of Ishmael's playful world-making which gains intensity and drama by including long stretches of metaphysical probing.

to get at hidden meanings behind the impenetrable mask of visible things; his obsession with Moby Dick, who for him embodies this malignity and impenetrability; his scorn for his own body and the body's work; and his willful disregard for 'nature,' for natural beauty and natural human longings despite their appeal for him. (...) Yet a sensitivity to Melville's fluid consciousness also helps one to understand features of his procedure with Ahab. First, just as *Moby-Dick* is a compendium of previous texts reworked in a chowder of Melville's own making, so Ahab himself is a composite of earlier historical, literary, and mythical figures."⁴ (39)

If, at a closer look, Ahab emerges as a compendium of literary roles, as a "Rollenbündel," the same applies even more strongly to the narrator of the novel who has been characterized as a "chameleon" by several critics, including McIntosh: "Even in the first chapter he is both a common sailor and a reflective loner (...) he is a chameleon of a narrator. Successively he takes on the coloration of a Father Mapple, a Queequeg, an Ahab, or a Stubb." (48 f.) Carolyn Porter calls Ishmael, the narrator, a sponge, "capable of soaking up an infinite number of voices and squeezing out their discourse into a pool as large as the ocean he sails."⁵ (100) As any reader of the novel knows, this narrator is by no means disturbed by frequent structural or narrative inconsistencies that result from his incessant play with voices and changing perspectives: "He is, for example, notorious for reporting soliloquies he cannot pretend to have witnessed, and indeed, for disappearing entirely on occasion." (80) Despite our awareness of these failed connections and missing links, we do not experience the novel as inconsistent, however. Rather, its consistency is that of the enthusiastic juggling act Melville performs before our eyes.

The continuous role play that even results in the occasional disappearance of the first-person narrator finds its equivalent on the formal and generic level of the novel in a repeated change of literary genres, forms and stylistic registers: "What other novel changes its gears so abruptly between chapters as *Moby-Dick* does?" Richard Brodhead asks pointedly (1976, 142). The hunger for expansion which motivates the endless stream of associations of the narrator is also at work on the level of composition: "But they also display Melville's hereafter typical act of annexing the contents of libraries directly onto his own work in progress. In

4 See also Richard Brodhead: "What other character in literature is alluded into being so much as Ahab is?" *The School of Hawthorne*, 37.

5 This hunger for cultural material is already present in the extracts preceding the narrative: "Very quickly, the book advertises its openness to a host of perspectives in the Extracts, an anthology of passages on the whale culled from old books and new. Indeed, *Moby-Dick* is, among other things, an encyclopedia of extracts." McIntosh, 24.

these instances, as later, Melville draws the most far-flung readings in around the project he is working on. Seizing their procedures, he at once converts them into voices *he* can try on. And it is through this quick apprehension, then assimilation of other writing into his own that Melville grasps new ideas of what writing can be and do." (1986, 22) William Charvat has described this exploratory mode of writing and its striking result quite fittingly when he says: "He [Melville] needed a form in which his unordered, unfocused, many-sided, often contradictory speculations could be given free play – in which, indeed, he could *play* with ideas without committing himself to a position. (...) The form he found was that of the expanding self." (221) Ahab's metaphysical despair finds its counterpart in Melville's enthusiastic discovery and exploration of new possibilities of fiction, in which the figure of the tragic quester and Faustian truth-seeker is, in the final analysis, only one – though still the most tempting and aesthetically most "effective" – theatrical role of the expanding self.⁶ The quest for art replaces the metaphysical quest because it provides an ideal opportunity for the individual to put himself at the center of newly created worlds, so that individual self-esteem is no longer derived from the success or failure of a metaphysical quest but from successive acts of literary self-expansion and imaginary self-empowerment.⁷

Aesthetically, Melville, together with other writers of the *American Renaissance*, has often been described as a symbolist and modernist *avant la lettre* who expresses an avantgarde resistance to mimetic, allegorical or ideological forms of reading by symbolic modes of representation. He would thus provide a supreme example – and this is, in fact, how he has been described for a long time – of literature's potential to prevent the reader (and, by implication, the individual member of society) from becoming arrested in social or cultural convention. My point is that there is another possibility of characterizing *Moby-Dick's* remarkable multiplicity of forms and the function they may fulfill for the reader: What Melville's use of fiction opens up is a constant play with different roles and masks of the self, which, in its striving for imaginary self-expansion,

6 In this context, it is striking to see how Ahab is the representative figure in most interpretations that aim at a historical reading, while Ishmael, the narrator, is the person to turn to when questions of textuality and linguistic play are at stake.

7 Cf. Lawrence Buell: "So with *Moby-Dick's* treatment of the 'symbolic' character of the whale, which in some ways the text suggests is nothing more than an inscription written onto him not only by Ahab but also by the narrator, who, with disarming candor, explicitly classifies whales as books and admits, by conceding the defectiveness of his taxonomy, the impossibility of the enterprise. The attempt to write the gospel of the whale threatens to become a confession and enactment of the inability to achieve anything beyond the act of writing itself." *New England Literary Culture*, 184.

draws on fiction's potential to explore a whole range of cultural options of self-definition and self-empowerment. In its freedom to link real with imagined worlds, fiction is ideally suited not only to double the self (as innumerable critics have shown) but literally to multiply it indefinitely in the exploration of imaginary worlds.

II.

Using a concept that seems to me of great explanatory power for American cultural history, the sociologist Robert Bellah and his collaborators have described this new possibility and form of self-authorization by means of fiction as manifestation of what they call expressive individualism, a concept defined in contrast to an earlier form of economic or utilitarian individualism (Bellah, 1985). The difference between these two stages of individualism resides in the changing sources of self-definition and self-esteem on which they draw. In the prevalent form of individualism of the 18th and 19th century, as it has been analyzed by Tocqueville, Max Weber, and numerous others since then, self-esteem is derived primarily from economic success and social respectability on which the individual's place in the social hierarchy depends. The most important quality required for realizing this goal is the ability of self-discipline and self-restraint. Hence, as the new historicism has reminded us again, a training in self-discipline is one of the major cultural projects of the nineteenth century, although the actual manifestations of this project may be less panoptic than the more radical new historicists claim, and much more based on the skillful stimulation of a desire for psychic self-regulation, as Richard Brodhead has shown in an exemplary analysis of the domestic novel in his essay "Sparing the Rod." (1993) Such self-discipline and the respectability that comes with it, has to be earned the hard way. It requires constant control of one's impulses and the inner strength to defer the temptations of instant gratification. Analogous to the act of saving, the individual has to go through a long period of self-denial in order to accumulate a stock of capital, in both economic and social terms, which finally yields its profits in the form of increasing social approval and a rise in the social hierarchy. The typical literary genres of this economic individualism, the autobiographical success-story, but also the *Bildungsroman* or the story of female education, are therefore teleological in conception, their basic narrative pattern is that of a rise or fall, their recurring emotional dramas are those of traumatic injustice and the withholding of just rewards, but also, possibly, a final experience of triumph.

phant retribution; their ideal is the formation of a character that is strong and self-disciplined enough to survive this long ordeal of social apprenticeship.

In contrast, the culture of expressive individualism is not primarily concerned with a social rise to respectability but with the possibility of self-realization. Its major value is no longer an experience of economic success and social recognition but an experience of cultural difference, that is, the ability of the individual to assert its own uniqueness and otherness against the powers of cultural convention and encroaching disciplinary regimes. If development and growth are key terms of the cultural formation of economic individualism, difference is the key term of the new type of expressive individualism. For the purpose of identifying oneself as different, the economic realm can no longer offer the major model, because this realm requires predictability and consistency of behavior. It is therefore culture which takes the place of the economy as the paradigmatic sphere, as is exemplified by the voracious, world-hungry narrator of *Moby-Dick* for whom cultures from ancient to contemporary offer an inexhaustible supply of options for self-dramatization. In order to be able to take advantage of this rich supply, however, the self has to be flexible and fluid. It must be flexible enough not to remain tied to any single role or identity. Instead, it must be free to use the wide spectrum of cultural options for the purpose of staging alternative possibilities of the self in an eclectic and "plural" way. While literary genres like the historical novel, the adventure story, the domestic novel, or the realistic novel introduce the reader to cultural practices of self-discipline, the culture of expressive individualism may instill a new form of compulsiveness, this time, however, not in defense of a stable, inner-directed character but, quite on the contrary, in pursuit of a constant reinvention of the self.

Thus, the immense usefulness of fiction for the new expressive individualism does not only lie in its rich and seemingly inexhaustible supply of material for the purpose of self-dramatization, that is, in its function as cultural memory or storehouse of different possibilities of self-realization, but even more so in its function as a "training ground" for the ability to process a rapid sequence of cultural options – as is demonstrated in *Moby-Dick* in an exemplary way. In doing this, Melville's novel provides a major instance – appreciated only retrospectively in a period which marks the final break-through of the new type of individualism on a broad social scale – of the discovery of fiction as a nourishing ground for an emerging expressive individualism. In terms of cultural history, it is the book's major achievement that it transforms the novel of social apprenticeship and explores the possibilities of a new cultural practice of

playful role taking. The typical texts of this expressive individualism are therefore potentially interminable, the stories they tell remain open-ended, their narrative mode is one of ironic distance, self-irony, and self-disclosure, their ideal that of a fluid, protean self which is always on the run from becoming imprisoned in that most fateful of disasters that can happen to any progressive person today, a stable identity.

To contrast economic and expressive individualism in this way, as significantly different possibilities of the individual's search for self-esteem, strikes me as a heuristically useful way of distinguishing two major manifestations of individualism. Obviously, these two forms are not neatly separated in their actual historical appearance. Economic individualism continues to be alive and well. As a rule, the two forms coexist as two options of individualism today. In many cases, they may appear in mixed form. Recent criticism has pointed out, for example, to what extent Benjamin Franklin, who is presented by Bellah as an exemplary cultural representative of economic individualism, already uses writing for the purposes of self-fashioning and self-authorization. However, he can only do this by offering especially powerful models of psychic self-regulation. On the other side of the historical spectrum, Daniel Bell bases his analysis of the cultural contradictions of capitalism not only on the idea of a coexistence of different forms of individualism but also on the claim of their growing incompatibility.⁸ Broadly speaking, it seems warranted to say, however, that: a) the social role of expressive individualism has dramatically increased since its first "break-through" manifestations in the Romantic period; b) this development was propelled decisively by the growing authority of art and other forms of cultural self-expression, but,

8 "Against the holistic view of society, I find it more useful to think of *contemporary* society ... as three distinct realms, each of which is obedient to a different axial principle. I divide society, analytically, into the *techno-economic* structure, the *polity*, and the *culture*. These are not congruent with one another, and have different rhythms of change; they follow different norms which legitimate different, and even contrasting, types of behavior. It is the discordances between these realms which are responsible for the various contradictions within society." (Bell, 10) "... the contradictions of capitalism of which I speak in these pages, have to do with the disjunction between the kind of organization and the norms demanded in the economic realm, and the norms of self-realization that are now central in the culture. The two realms which had historically been joined to produce a single character structure – that of the Puritan and of his calling – have now become unjoined." (15) The advantage of Bellah's description and terminology over competing concepts of cultural criticism such as "personality" (Susman), "narcissism" (Lasch), or "hedonism" (Bell) is that the concept of expressive individualism opens up the possibility of describing a fundamental value change not primarily as a story of loss, deterioration, or conformist adaptation to new demands of the social order.

especially, by the increased possibilities of imaginary self-empowerment offered through fiction; and c) this gradually emerging expressive individualism has found a whole new range of options in the era of postindustrialism and postmodernism with its new "post-materialist" values of self-realization and radical self-determination. While the Romantic period and the experimental culture of modernism can be seen as avant-garde movements of expressive individualism, the postmodern period has witnessed the broad "democratization" of their cultural insistence on the right (and need) to be different.

III.

What I want to suggest, then, is the possibility of providing another historical context for understanding the cultural significance and function of a novel like *Moby-Dick*, one, in fact, that would bring the discussion closer to the question Richard Brodhead raises in his paper on cultures of criticism in this volume, namely, that of the historicity of the new historicism itself. This context is the emergence of a new cultural formation which, for lack of a better word, I want to call expressive individualism – a social practice in which self-esteem is gained by the cultural construction of difference. Such a link, it seems to me, would be much better suited to explain the unusual, innovative structure of Melville's novel than, for example, neo-historicist suggestions of an anxiety over slavery or European revolutions or an affinity to the ideology of *Manifest Destiny* – references to historical phenomena that are helpful for understanding certain parts and aspects of the book, but not its structure itself. My suggestion, however, raises questions of its own which must be addressed. To start with, it implies that there is a more fundamental and basic drive at work in the emergence of the *American Renaissance* than political anxieties of the period. I see the basis of this drive in a search for individual self-esteem which, on its most general level, can be seen as an anthropological element of the human make-up, but which clearly also has its own cultural history and thus historicity of changing cultural manifestations. As several recent studies have shown, American literature gained a new importance and function in the middle of the 19th century within the context of an emerging middle-class formation in which fiction became a central communicative mode for the dissemination of values and, hence, an important instrument of socialization and disciplinization. This "discipline through love," or, to put it more generally, through psychic self-regulation, had a paradoxical effect: It was based on

a promise of increased self-worth and thus established a fiction (or, if you want, an illusion) of the importance of the self that began to develop its own cultural force and, subsequently, a cultural logic of increasing demands for recognition and individual self-fulfillment.

To point out this new usefulness of literature for the enhancement of individual self-esteem by means of imaginary self-expansion and self-fashioning does not mean to resort to a justly discredited idea of culture as an autonomous realm, developing independently and free from the influence of history and politics. However, it can provide an explanation why culture did indeed begin to develop into a separate public sphere, why it took on an increasing importance for questions of social self-definition, why it was able to form its own tenacious institutions, and why it eventually produced an adversary culture of its own. The fact that culture became institutionalized as a separate sphere with its own promise, if not metaphysics, of social regeneration is, in other words, not due to its ability to stand outside history or to transcend it, but is a highly instructive historical (and political) fact in its own right. The at present almost obligatory explanation of this growing institutional "independence" (which ought not to be confused with autonomy) is that the claim of a separate realm free from politics had the purpose of creating an illusion of individual agency and autonomy, while its true function consisted in a shrewd strategy of cooptation, containment, and coercion. However, even if the promise of individuality and individual self-worth was an illusory one, it clearly was an illusion that developed its own imaginary power, began to turn into a script for self-realization, and dramatically raised the status of a sphere which "the system" itself had strengthened out of a growing need for legitimacy. One unforeseen result was the emergence of a growing contradiction between cultural promise and social restriction. The equation between Melville's self-empowerment through art and the politics of *Manifest Destiny* provides a case in point. Undoubtedly, both of these instances provide strong cultural manifestations of individualism. This does not yet establish a homology of function, however. Quite on the contrary, it may be argued that the literature of the *American Renaissance* created forms of articulation for nineteenth-century individualism which were instrumental in accelerating a process of cultural dehierarchization that eventually also undermined the cultural authority of exactly those forms of strong, imperial selfhood to which it may have appeared analogous at first.

The historical moment of a growing importance of literature as a form of socialization and psychic self-regulation is thus also, ironically enough, the moment in which a growing contradiction between the

economic, political, and cultural spheres opens up, because culture, by discovering and foregrounding the role of the imagination for the authorization and empowerment of the self, begins to take the quest for self-worth in entirely new directions.⁹ As we realize now, Melville was way ahead of his time in the discovery of this potential of fiction. The experimental playfulness of his literary method and his redefinition of the novel as a realm of imaginary self-expansion irritated contemporary readers and critics alike.¹⁰ Melville's intellectualization of a literary form whose cultural significance derived, up to this point, from the fact that "high" and "low" were not yet strictly separated from one another, already presupposed a reader and a form of individuality which did not yet exist and found its first forms of articulation in texts like *Moby-Dick*. Melville's invitation to the reader to join him in an exploration of different options of self-dramatization gained broad resonance only after World War II. Historically, this is also the moment when the final acknowledgment of the modernist experiment and, hence, of a privileged, culturally sanctioned realm of individual self-expression provided literary criticism not only with a new promise of cultural importance but also with a new institutional legitimation.

The final admission of *Moby-Dick* into the canon falls into a period in which literary criticism became an academic discipline in its own right. The novel's reputation and literary standing is thus shaped by a specific

9 It is part of the sociological context of this phenomenon that this potential was of special usefulness for a marginalized social group of impoverished gentry for whom culture provided new possibilities of self-authorization.

10 Cf. Richard Brodhead's summary: "The book's heterogeneity, its inclusion of plural and competing kinds of literature, was recognized, but as a fault, by the reviewer who called it 'an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact.' – Its hyperactivity of style was noted, but as a flaw, by the reviewer who termed its language 'maniacal.' And its philosophical reach and ardent speculative energy were grasped, but as a source of pain, not wonder, by the reviewer who condemned its 'piratical running down of creeds and opinions.' [...] But reports of nineteenth-century readings of *Moby-Dick* after 1851 are so rare as to be collector's items. It had a handful of admirers in England and Scotland in the later nineteenth century, but in America it virtually disappeared from view. Undiscussed and unread, *Moby-Dick* became, for sixty years after it was published, something like a nonexistent book." "Introduction", *New Essays on Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, p. 17. See also James Barbour: "The reviews of *Moby-Dick* were generally unkind. The book was light years ahead of its time ... At first *Moby-Dick* sold poorly and then not at all. Harper and Brothers reported an initial sale of 1535 copies; two months later another 471 copies were sold. Then it was over; orders dribbled in over the next quarter century (only two copies were purchased in 1876), and the book went out of print in America in 1887 with a total sale of 3180 copies." "All My Books Are Botches' ...", p. 47.

culture of criticism – in this case, however, not that of the publisher James T. Fields and the group of New England Brahmins centered around *The Atlantic* who were trying to establish a national canon for social and commercial reasons of their own.¹¹ Instead, *Moby-Dick's* recognition is linked to a culture of literary criticism which began to establish itself after World War I, along with modernist literature, but which really came into its own and found its present institutional base after World War II. This new professional culture of letters marks something like a final academic institutionalization of expressive individualism as a cultural practice. In fact, at a closer look, literary criticism has succeeded on the same grounds and has come to fulfill similar promises of imaginary self-definition and self-empowerment as our exemplary text *Moby-Dick*. Ironically enough, it is the phenomenon which seems to present the major weakness of literary studies, its inability to ever arrive at a definitive meaning, which provides literary analysis with a special potential for self-expression. Because fiction cannot be "verified" or falsified by reference, it invites imaginary addition and completion.¹² And the same holds true for literary interpretation. In dealing with fictive worlds, it, too, cannot be verified or falsified by an appeal to the authority of a referent, and thus, ultimately, functions as another scenario of world-making. Recent developments in the field – such as the anti-foundationalist critique of claims of objectivity in interpretation, the reconceptualization of theory as manifestation of a will to power, the displacement of method by "dazzling" performance, and the elimination of the idea (and the claims) of the aesthetic – have dramatically enhanced this potential and have opened up entirely new possibilities of critical self-empowerment.¹³

To see the new historicism as a cultural practice of expressive individualism, exemplified paradigmatically by an *American Renaissance*-text like *Moby-Dick*, can explain some striking similarities between these

11 For a description of the role of this group in the development of a canon of national literature see Jane Tompkins, "Masterpiece Theater: The Politics of Hawthorne's Literary Reputation," *Sensational Designs*, pp. 3–39 and Richard Brodhead, "Manufacturing You Into a Personage: Hawthorne, the Canon, and the Institutionalization of American Literature," *The School of Hawthorne*, pp. 48–66. Interestingly enough, both Tompkins and Brodhead base their story of a canon informed not primarily by "literary value" but by a cultural need of institutionalization on the case of Hawthorne and bracket the case of Melville.

12 So much so is this true that modern literature itself has made this activity of the reader increasingly a part of its own aesthetic strategies.

13 For an analysis of these developments see my essays on "The Americanization of Literary Studies," "The 'Americanization' of History in New Historicism," and "Radical Aesthetics."

two, apparently entirely different, forms of cultural commentary. Both forms have developed similar ways of world-making by roaming widely through a network of discourses which are brought together in a playful and performative manner whose arbitrariness is readily acknowledged.¹⁴ Both compensate for a loss of meta-narrative by counting on the power of performance as primary form of legitimation.¹⁵ In both cases, this strategic decision stands in the service of an increase in narrative choices against the tyranny of established conventions of historical narration.¹⁶ Even more importantly, I think that a reconceptualization of the new historicism as a cultural practice of expressive individualism can explain its most striking feature: its focus on, if not obsession with, the question of oppositionalism. Although the new historicism recommends itself as a mode of analysis designed to extend the possibilities of historical criticism by dealing with a wide range of discursive networks and formations, it is, in practice, almost exclusively concerned with the question of whether these texts are truly oppositional or not.¹⁷ In principle, a neo-historicist procedure, defined in primarily methodological terms as a poetics of culture, would not necessarily have to focus on this question. However, it most often does, because such a focus is crucially linked with the question of cultural difference.¹⁸ Opposition is the best way to assert

cultural difference, for it is opposition that allows difference to emerge most clearly and most pointedly,¹⁹ so that the argument over whether something is truly oppositional or not can become a central issue of self-fashioning, either by identifying exemplary acts of resistance²⁰ through culture, or by claiming superior oppositional insights over past forms of resistance. In this debate, diametrically opposed answers to the question whether a past text was complicit or subversive seem to coexist as equally valid options and a large part of the interpretive practice of this type of revisionism seems to emerge from the challenge to prove that, despite first appearances to the contrary, things were exactly different from what they appear to be.²¹

One of the questions that the current radical revisionism has not cared to address at all, or, if so, only in passing and very weakly, is what I want

studies, hardly any of the new revisionists seem really interested in dealing with matters of class. The reason, I think, is that, as a category of difference, class is not fundamental enough, because it is still a "universal" concept which disregards other sources of difference and, in its implications, retains the possibility of an assimilation to a "universal" brotherhood of mankind. For the same reason, "ethnicity," which can refer to Italo-American males as much as to African-American females, has been replaced as a term of difference by that of "race." Altogether, the umbrella term "race, class, and gender-studies" is by now misleading and reflects a transitory stage in the formation of the new revisionism in which discrimination was not yet defined almost exclusively in cultural but also in economic terms. Actually, the three categories that establish unbridgeable "otherness" or difference nowadays are race, gender, and sexual difference, that is, gay and lesbian sexual preferences. – For an attempt to revive "class" as a category of cultural analysis, see Dimock and Gilmore, 1994, who, in contrast to my analysis, link the notable demise of the concept to the "unprecedented crisis now facing Marxism." (1) However, I think that this development was well under way before the spectacular collapse of Marxism as a "historical force." (1). One may argue, in fact, that the rediscovery of Marxism by the student movement was already one in which its potential for cultural resistance or "subversion" was predominant.

19 In his survey of Melville-criticism of the 1980s, Andrew Delbanco thus characterizes much of the recent criticism as "predictably adversarial." 71.

20 The latter explains an often noted, at first sight puzzling, emphasis in neo-historicist studies of American literature: its almost exclusive interest in texts of the 19th and early 20th century literature. Since the question of opposition is tied to that of representation, the new historicism needs past forms of representation to be able to establish superiority in matters of true oppositionalism.

21 Cf. Gerald Graff, "A point is reached at which almost anything can be praised for its subversiveness or damned for its vulnerability to co-optation, for there is always some frame of reference that will support either description." "Co-optation," 173. – On the "unhistorical" way of "locking the text into a single posture" by "turning a temporal relation of multiple sedimentation into a spatial relation of either opposition or containment," see Dimock, "Feminism, New Historicism, and the Reader," 615 f. By relating two strong and influential versions of the new revisionism, Dimock, in turn, wants "to mobilize and multiply the grounds of difference." (619)

14 The point of my argument is not to claim that the new historicism is *the* paradigmatic critical manifestation of expressive individualism but that its premises and procedures can be understood as another expression of that cultural formation (as can be other versions of the current revisionism). What gives the new historicism special importance is that it has managed to introduce new and ingenious ways of self-empowerment into a discipline of the humanities, namely that of historical criticism, which was up to this point still governed by a primarily "economic" vision of the place of individuals in society, including that of the interpreter. The heated debates in traditional forms of historical criticism, including Marxist approaches, center around the question whether an interpreter applied a model of historical change and historical analysis "correctly." In the new freedom of linkage which the new historicism claims the most characteristic mode of giving authority to the interpretation of one's material has become that of the rhetorically powerful assertion of the ingenuity of one's interpretive performance. This is most obviously true for those works which do not just pursue the agenda of a "historical turn" but try to do so in a conspicuously "neo-historicist" way.

15 On the willful "self-theatricalization" of the new historicism, see my essay on "The 'Americanization' of History in New Historicism."

16 Thus, quite fittingly, Geoffrey Galt Harpham considers the neo-historicist study of history as "an instrument in the construction of the scholar's subjectivity." 373.

17 In this characteristic emphasis, the new historicism is representative of large parts of the current revisionism in literary studies.

18 This search for difference explains, among other things, why, although the designation "race, class, and gender" has become something like the broadest and most widely accepted umbrella term for characterizing the new revisionism in literary and cultural

to call "the A to B problem." If American literature and culture of the nineteenth century present exemplary discourses of disciplining and shrewd political containment, how is it possible that their general effect has been to produce a new class of intellectuals and academics in the twentieth century who are exactly the opposite of what they should be according to their own analysis of the disciplinary power of culture, and who, on the contrary, have come to criticize this disciplinary regime mercilessly and with great intellectual acumen? The general paradox repeats itself in smaller scale on the level of the development of *American Studies*, for, clearly, it has been the paradoxical result of the academic socialization of a whole generation of Americanists raised on the oppositional fantasies of the liberal tradition and, specifically, a Melville idealized as supreme nonconformist, that this generation has produced the most radical critics of this version. If cultural discourses would indeed have such sweeping disciplinary impact that even the most radically minded intellectuals and writers of the nineteenth century were unable to realize this effect, then it seems difficult to account for a general cultural development that eventually led to exactly the opposite result. If on the other hand, these intellectuals are participants in the same cultural practice of self-empowerment by the cultural construction of difference, such development would make immediate sense and explain a logic of radicalization in which one critic attempts to out-manuever and out-radicalize the other in order to stand out from the rest.²²

Such considerations put the explicit or implicit neo-historicist version of American literary history as a sequence of disciplinary regimes into question. However, a counter history, focussing on elements of cultural dehierarchization and individual self-empowerment by means of fiction, does not necessarily have to contradict such a narrative of disciplination, especially where this story itself has been enriched by a psychological model of disciplining through "voluntary" forms of psychic self-regula-

22 A cultural history of the changing cultural constructions of "opposition" has yet to be written. For the liberal tradition of the 1950s and beyond, cultural difference emerged in opposition to the conformist grip of middle-brow culture. It therefore sufficed, for example, to point to Melville's history of being misunderstood to identify him as an exemplary "nay-sayer." For the new revisionism, on the other hand, this opposition to middle-brow culture remains part of the same cultural system and thus supports the "very" system it purports to undermine. This means, however, that difference must now be established within the culture of oppositionalism itself. I think it is fair to say that the major part of the current revisionism in literary and cultural studies can be explained by this struggle for truly oppositional credentials. As Gerald Graff notes, the rate therefore seems to accelerate "at which a critical methodology goes from being celebrated as a revolutionary to being condemned as complicitous." 174.

tion. In fact, disciplination, individualization, and cultural dehierarchization may complement each other in unforeseen ways. In a seemingly paradoxical logic, disciplining the self also means strengthening it, containing it also means to establish an enabling structure. The increasing importance of fiction in American culture of the nineteenth century may be attributed to the fact that it served a crucial function in establishing a new disciplinary regime through the internalization of conflict. But fiction also became an essential driving force for ongoing acts of dehierarchization which are often – as, for example, in the sentimental novel and domestic fiction, the historical novel and the adventure story, as well as in the realistic novel – intricately related to the instillation of self-discipline. Seen from this perspective, psychic self-regulation provides the ground for nourishing self-images of strength and independence that will eventually pave the way for an attack on the very psychic mechanism which made this self-empowerment possible in the first place. Only such a dialectic can explain the paradox of a sequence of disciplinary regimes that ultimately led to entirely new forms of cultural radicalism.

Why, then, are the new historicism and other forms of the current revisionism in literary studies not acknowledging their family resemblance to cultural practices of self-fashioning articulated first by books like *Moby-Dick* and instead trying to distance themselves from these forms of individualism by presenting them as dupes of a system of ideological containment? One reason may be that to acknowledge such links would raise the question to what extent recent critical theories belong to the same cultural formation of expressive individualism. This, however, would suggest the possibility that the decided oppositionalism, which the new historicism and other forms of current revisionism pursue, is not quite what it claims to be: not primarily a form of political criticism, but the instrumentalization of politics as yet another option for an expressive individualism that has transformed literary criticism into a form of cultural self-empowerment.²³ This can, in fact, help to explain the new and dramatically different way in which the new historicism conceptualizes history: In neo-historicist studies and other current forms of revisionism, including race, class, and gender studies, history is conceived as an ines-

23 To describe the oppositionalism of the new historicism as primarily a search for cultural self-definition seems justified in view of the fact that its "politics" are hardly ever put forward in terms of a concrete political agenda, but, at best, as part of a broad anti-bourgeois critique of cultural oppression. Even if one claims – which one can do for good reason – that "the private is the political," this claim would in itself only reach the level of politics, where conclusions in terms of political programs and procedures are drawn.

capable barrier to self-realization, or, to use the movement's own terminology, as a sequence of disciplinary regimes that limit self-realization without overt repression.²⁴ Thus, instead of undermining the cultural effects of an ideology of individualism, these approaches carry its claims only one step further. Contrary to its own self-perception, the new historicism does not provide a political critique of individualism as a cultural construct, but a more radical version of this individualism, not a critique of individualism by "politics," but a critique based on the new politics of expressive individualism.

24 It is, by now, a familiar point of criticism in debates of the new historicism that the totalizing concept of power in neo-historicist studies influenced by Foucault subsume all forms of difference under a single logic of containment. But, clearly, these studies are written as analyses of an all-pervasive, "systemic" denial of the possibilities of self-determination and self-realization and thus retain the idea as tacit norm. For a succinct analysis of the totalizing effects of neo-historicist studies, see Chapt. 5 of Brook Thomas's *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*.

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