The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel: *Moby-Dick* as Test Case

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This essay is an interim report on a long-term study of the chimera of the great American novel—the dream either of writing it or seeing it written. The project has three main facets: a chronicle of the dispensations of authorial, critical, and readerly pronouncements (a story with a distinct beginning, several middles, and no end); a historical-formalist comparative examination of several dozen aspirants and/or nominees; and a nation-and-narration metaperspective conceptualizing “American” narrative, in broadest terms, as part of a world system inflected by what Pascale Casanova calls the “Herder effect” (78–81), the postulate of each nation speaking in its own voice, within and against which its writers must thereafter contend, even such resolute cosmopolitans as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.

This might seem a distinctly unfashionable project, out of phase with the push to think beyond/outside the confines of nation-ness for which Americanists, myself included, have lately been calling as a counterweight to the overemphasis on US literary and cultural difference—the “literature of our own” phase, as it were—that long marked Americanist field-defining work. But beyond this, great American novelism as such might seem so quaintly paleolithic, long since dead as a viable subject for literary history, criticism, and theory. As one recent manifesto by Alan Williams begins by asking, “Aside from pissing off the literati, does the Great American Novel, a monumentally 19th century concept, serve any higher purpose?”

Indeed, the dream of the “GAN”—initially reduced from Great American Novel to acronym status by none other than Henry James—has been killed off not once but at least twice. It

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1 Henry James
degenerated into a media cliché soon after its first launch—on the same level, one nineteenth-century critic dryly observed, as “the great American sewing-machine, the great American public school, [and] the great American sleeping car” (Allen 1403). It was killed off again with the rise of American literary studies as an academic specialization in the middle half of the twentieth century, by a string of articles dismissing the GAN as a naively amateurish age-of-realism pipe dream, “faded into the limbo of literary lost causes” (Knox, “In Search” 64). Scrolling more slowly through the decades, we find a bad-tempered equivalent of the “escalator effect” with which Raymond Williams metaphorizes the history of pastoral nostalgia: each generation fancying that the one before lived a life closer to nature (9–12). GAN commentary, by contrast, played itself through as a discourse of repeated disenchantment: each generation seeing the one before as more gullible than itself.

Yet critical pissiness also suggests the persistence of some sort of hydrant, however phantasmal. Clearly, neither critical skepticism nor authorial diffidence ever kept US writers from attempting big national fictions, then or now. “Every American novelist,” Maxine Hong Kingston once wrote, secretly “wants to write the Great American Novel” (57–58). (This during the runup to *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* [1989], one of the texts on my list.) Or take the spate of Y2K doorstop books summing up the century, or at least the half-century, such as John Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997). 9/11 may well generate the same. As my colleague Louis Menand remarked to me, no serious reviewer today would tout a book as the great American novel, yet it’s hard to think of a major US novelist who hasn’t given it a shot. The persistence in the face of skepticism and mockery of the desire for a preeminent text (or select group of texts) that might encapsulate national experience reflects some entrenched quasi-understanding among authors, critics, the publishing industry, and readers at large to read the national through _N_ number of a perhaps infinitely extending series of putative master narratives, an alliance reinforced every time some random journalist compares Lyndon Johnson or George W. Bush to Captain Ahab stalking the whale, or when “Bush’s brain,” presidential advisor Karl Rove, summed up the sense of being hunted by Democratic lawmakers as, “I’m Moby-Dick and they’re after me” (Baker and Fletcher A1). Even that disaffected manifesto quoted earlier gets sucked into the vortex by going on to specify nine so-called parameters for GAN aspirants “that should go without saying,” the last of which is that “It has to reference _Moby-Dick_ as the Great American Novel” (A. Williams n.p.).
Regarding the obsolescence of the nation-focus, I hope to treat both narrative and critical centripetalism in the light of the messily hybrid and migratory character of the texts, tropes, and plot strategies under view—including the fascination with the animating big idea itself. Broadly speaking, the conception of “a great national novel” would seem to be one (although hardly the inevitable) outcome of “the national longing for form” (Brennan 44–70) in a context of postcolonial anxiety about cultural coherence and legitimation, such as obtained in the US when the GAN first came into circulation. Why a similar discourse developed in some Latin-American countries rather than others, and why there is no equivalent in nineteenth-century German literary culture for Allesandro Mazzoni’s I Promessi Sposi (1842), despite the analogous condition of a populace culturally interknit striving to realize itself as a unified country, may forever remain something of a mystery. For now, suffice it to say that US literary-cultural history is not unique in its fascination with fictional narratives that promise to sum up the national essence, nor by the same token must an inquiry into such lead to naive reaffirmation of US literary autonomy.

1. Genesis, Premises, Templates, Dispensations

Often we can’t specify when a concept gets put into circulation. Here, we can: a short essay of January 1868 by New England man of letters and Civil War veteran John W. DeForest, author of a new novel that clearly tried to model his idea, Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty (1867), one of those historically notable (Fluck 88–113) but subgalactic texts that keep getting rediscovered and then falling out of print.

DeForest envisaged a work that would capture “the American soul” through portrayal of “the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence” via a “tableau” that would grasp the full geographical and cultural range of national life, with the amplitude of a Thackeray, a Trollope, a Balzac (De Forest 27). To date, he argues, American fiction has been overwhelmingly “local” or sectional; moreover, its best fiction writer, Hawthorne, captures “little but the subjective of humanity” (28). The closest approximation is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), which despite glaring defects did have “a national breadth to the picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking,... drawn with a few strong and passionate strokes, not filled in thoroughly, but still a portrait” (28).
De Forest risked self-contradiction in taking for granted that there must be such a thing as an “American soul” when the literary evidence to date, by his own say-so, argued the opposite. He was myopic in positing that regional and national fiction must be antagonistic. So too his assessment of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which shows scant interest in slavery and racial division except as issues now happily resolved, much less in the possibility that a black novelist might see things differently from a white one. Such limitations mark him as the product of a particular background and time: a white Anglo-American Yankee writing in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, with fictional realism coming into ascendancy, long before the critical establishment began to take serious notice of the large body of narrative writing by writers other than white Protestants.

Myopic, yet prophetic, too. Critical calls for an autonomous national literature dated back to the Revolution, but no substantive theory of what might actually constitute national fiction had congealed, due partly to the regional fissuring DeForest deplores. With the war behind and completion of territorial conquest and hinterland settlement in sight, so too (for the first time) was the GAN. It was, in short, arguably at once the leading literary edge of the “romance of reunion” between northern and southern whites and, beyond that, a leading literary edge of the broader push toward consolidation of the nation as a literary, cultural, and political unit. Also pivotal was prose fiction’s rising critical prestige stateside. Nina Baym, the most thorough student of antebellum fiction criticism, convincingly argues that the emergence of the GAN idea required a greater acceptance of prose fiction as a high art form than then obtained, however much Cooper, Sedgwick, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Stowe, and others helped make that emergence possible. Sure enough, I’ve unearthed only a few scattered antebellum references to “the great American novel,” the earliest an advertisement for an 1852 London penny edition reprint of, fortuitously, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a promotional hype that simply touts its runaway best-seller status. The literary nationalism that had run strong in US criticism since the Revolutionary era and had intensified during the antebellum years was an indispensable precondition, but not until the late 1860s was a self-conscious discourse of the (or even “a”) great American novel possible.

De Forest’s essay was also prophetic in its concurrence with a rising tide of nation-centric theory abroad. The conception of national literature as national expression in Hippolyte Taine’s just-published *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863) would have immense influence on late-century formulations of American
literary/cultural difference (Evans 12–13, 92–93). This too was the eve of Ernest Renan’s seminal essay, “What Is a Nation?” (1882), which defined “a nation” as “a soul, a spiritual principle,” entailing “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories” and “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (Renan 19). That personification is the remote origin of the most influential treatise on nationalism in recent times, Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983, 1991), which reinvents nationalist theology as mythic fabrication (15).

Anderson theorized the nation as the fruit of collective imagination, not primordially “there.” Whatever its shortcomings, this model without question intensified literary-critical attention to the historic role of literature and the arts in the work of nation-building. Through an Andersonian prism, nations seemed indeed to “depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature generally plays a decisive role”—in the first instance, the novel particularly (Brennan 49). De Forest himself would never have made such big claims about the American novel, which for him barely existed. His standpoint was far closer to Renan’s that national fiction presupposed a national soul, not that fiction was a nation-building force. He shows no interest, for example, in Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s activist thrust, much less its possible role in touching off the Civil War. Yet he took the notion of nation-building and fiction-building as intertwined projects to a new plane of assertion that haunted later novelistic and critical practice. The very naivete of Taine’s, Renan’s, and De Forest’s hypostasizations relative to Anderson’s demystification of the nation as a produced effect abetted the mentality that a nation’s artifacts might embody nationness if not create it.

The GAN soon entrenched itself as a term of reference for publishers, reviewers, and critics, despite the skepticism it provoked. Though used more as an epithet than as a concept defined with any precision, several specific connotations quickly took hold. First, GAN discourse commingles retrospect with anticipation, typically stipulating that the great work remains unwritten, although some previous named effort points the way. When a specific claim is lodged, except for publisher advertisements of new titles, it’s usually a novel at least a decade old. Second, GAN discourse therefore correlates broadly, but unevenly, with evolving canon theory, increasingly appropriated, though never monopolized, by the professoriat. On the one hand, GAN talk is a far more open and participatory discourse, as evidenced during the early years by contributors’ columns in newspapers and
magazines and in our own time by internet blogs. Googling “great
american novel” while drafting this essay yielded 2,660,000 hits
(many of them predictably redundant). On the other hand, both
late Victorian common readers and turn-of-the-twenty-first-century
bloggers have regularly been swayed, even against their intuitive
judgments, by what they take to be critical consensus, as for
instance with those today who accept *Moby-Dick* (1851) as a
possible GAN while confessing that they don’t much like or
understand it.¹²

A third constituent is the paradox of the one and the many.
Although the mythical GAN is regularly hypostasized as a singu-
lar, unique “the,” it’s taken *de facto* more often than not as a
plural category. One can readily think of it as, say, a top five, as
with the much-publicized 2006 *New York Times* poll of the best
American novels of the past quarter century (Toni Morrison’s
*Beloved* [1987] received the most votes overall) (Scott 16–19), or
as an open, even infinitely extendable, series. This pluralization
comports with the disputes over criteria dating back to De Forest.
Should regional fiction be disallowed? Frank Norris, for one,
claimed the opposite. Should the setting necessarily be American?
Edith Wharton argued the contrary. Must it be a realist mimesis?
Most authors and readers seem to have thought so, especially
through the 1930s, but many objected from the start, anticipating
the now-discredited but hardly defunct correlation, first suggested
by D. H. Lawrence and F. R. Leavis, of romance as the mark of
American fictional difference, a claim also sometimes made (on
rather different grounds) for Latin-American narrative as well
(Glissant 105).¹³

So, even though the GAN has typically been deployed as a
labeling device, it also implies a rudimentary conceptual matrix,
an incipient critical problematics, not merely for the score of
novels most commonly so named by those who play the game, but
also as a basis for mapping the whole, massively complex, ever-
changing flow of narrative discourse in US history since its
inception.

Several recipes or formulae—*not* mutually exclusive—seem
to facilitate, though hardly ensure, GAN status. The most obvious
and surefire is to have been subjected repeatedly to a series of
memorable rewritings (in whatever genre or media), thereby
giving the text a kind of master-narrative status whether or not it
aspired to such. Of this *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), the most
durably canonical classic American fiction, is my favorite
premodern demonstration case, both despite and because it is argu-
ably at least as much a diasporic or “Atlantic world” narrative as
an “American” one, despite having traditionally been treated by
Americanists as a designedly fictive myth of national/Puritan origins. Recipe two might be called the romance of the divide (or “divides,” plural), fictions of sectional and/or ethno-racial division instantiating that division in the form of a family history and/or heterosexual love affair, which thereby becomes a national synecdoche. De Forest’s Miss Ravenel builds around this trope, although by far the most influential early text to do so is Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Recipe three is a narrative centering on the lifeline of a socially paradigmatic figure (traditionally male, but diminishingly so), whose odyssey tilts on the one side toward picaresque and on the other toward a saga of personal transformation, or failure of such. Among premodern candidates, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) stands out in later critical accounts, if not in its own time. An expanded variant of the socially representative protagonist mode, arguably a category of its own, is the paradigmatic family saga, as in Gertrude Stein’s The Making of Americans (1925), William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom (1936), and John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939). Still another recipe is the heterogeneous symbolic assemblage of individuals, often positioned in a confined space in the service of a common task or defined against the background of an epochal public event, constituting thereby an image of “democratic” promise and/or dysfunction. Here Moby-Dick, with its complex ideologization of the shipboard microcosm, the global village that is the Pequod’s crew, today stands pre-eminent among the classic US fictions. That The Scarlet Letter, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Huckleberry Finn, and Moby-Dick have in fact been cited in latter-day lists of possible GANs more often than any other premodern texts confirms the ongoing influence of critical canonization (in Stowe’s case, re-canonization), ratified by school syllabi and artistic recyclings at various levels of sophistication from pop to avant-garde, in shaping public memory of what counts as monumental in the distant past, if not the near distance.

These encapsulations, formulaic though they are, should substantiate why a great American novel project must be transnational and also transgeneric. Recipe number three, for example, can’t be understood without taking into account antecedent picaresque and Bildungsroman traditions, as well as such nonfictional prototypes as slave narrative, conversion narrative, and Franklinesque success stories, none of whose provenances are distinctively national. The same holds for novels like Moby-Dick that build on the heteroglot assemblage scenario: e.g. Frank Norris’s The Octopus (1901) (especially if considered the first of an unfinished trilogy), John Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy (1930–36), Norman Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead (1948) (steeped in both Melville and Dos
Passos), and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) (steeped in Melville, if not also Dos Passos).

Perilous though schemes of periodization always are, for rough and ready purposes one might distinguish three phases of GAN discourse. During the late 1800s, the basic templates and defining issues were set in place. Then came a further surge of interest among writers and reviewers, followed by expressions of disavowal by the emerging literary-scholarly establishment. On the one hand, a number of major novelists increasingly weighed in during the first third of the twentieth century with position statements bespeaking personal investments in the GAN, and the most exhaustive attempts yet to actualize the GAN (whether or not directly so professed) hit the market: e.g. Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925), Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, and Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy. It’s tempting to see the 1920s as a breakthrough point of sorts, as the decade that saw the publication of the first of a half-dozen twentieth-century parodies entitled *The Great American Novel* (by William Carlos Williams in 1923), concurrently with Dreiser’s and Stein’s discrepant monumentalizations, as well as with the slow-selling but now perennial nominee *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the now-faded contender *Babbitt* (1922), and the best-selling satire *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), proclaimed rather astonishingly as a GAN candidate by Edith Wharton (Hegeman 525) in memory of her own shot at the GAN in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), also centered on an uppity parvenu (Lee 330). It’s also tempting to presuppose some interconnection between this scene, the rise of the US to acknowledged world power status after the Great War, and the birth of American literature as an academic discipline. Yet however influential these latter developments were in promoting the circulation and prestige of the US worldwide during the remainder of the century, the professionalization of American literature studies also reinforced a dismissive view of the GAN idea as amateurish sloganeering on behalf of a dubiously middlebrow project not to be confused with what really counted in modern fiction, the high modernist revolution from James and Conrad on, a judgment explicitly seconded by (some) creative writers. New journalist Tom Wolfe, for instance, drew on Lionel Trilling’s critique of Dreiserian social realism in explaining “Why They Aren’t Writing the Great American Novel Anymore.” Answer: the panoramic social novel was dead. “Most serious American novelists would rather cut their wrists than be known as ‘the secretary of American society,’” declared Wolfe, quoting Balzac’s self-description. “With fable, myth and the sacred office to think about—who wants such a menial role?” (157).
Since Wolfe’s article in 1972, indeed since World War II, precious few novelists or critics of stature have deigned to treat the GAN as a credible idea or enabling myth. British writer Martin Amis’s defense of Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) as the book that “retired the cup” (114) and American novelist Jane Smiley’s of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the book that should have been the *ur*-text for American fiction rather than *Huckleberry Finn* are conspicuous exceptions. More indicative of the distinct unfashionableness of GAN talk is Norman Mailer’s gun-shy tribute to Dos Passos: “If we have any one great American novel, and perhaps we don’t, but if we do; it would be *U.S.A.*” Still, notwithstanding its ostensible second death, the idea lives on as mantra and as aspiration, despite the double-whammy of the modernist (and postmodernist) revolutions and the critical sophistication of US literature studies that came with the academicization of the field.

How can that be? For one thing, the desire to produce and consume social realist fiction has never gone out of fashion, and furthermore it’s tended to renew itself by hybridizing with modernist and then postmodernist experimentalism. Among latter-day contenders and/or nominees, witness *Augie March*, behind which stands Dreiser as well as Whitman and Twain; *Invisible Man* (1952), behind which stands Dostoyevsky as well as Emerson, Twain, Faulkner, and African-American musical and oral vernacularity; and De Lillo’s *Underworld*, a hybrid of old-fashioned chronicle fiction and postmodern tonal flatness, ludic parody, and scrambled temporality.

Second, the dream of the GAN has arguably gained more than it’s lost as the result of the related phenomena of multiple ethno-literary renaissances starting in the 1920s and the two-stage process within American literature studies of first winnowing the US literary canon down to a select number of galactic luminaries during the middle third of the century, followed by the contestation of the distinctly white, male, Protestant, politically liberal result on behalf of the (especially) women and nonwhite writers this process marginalized. The winnowing phase helped catalyze *inter alia* the Melville revival, Faulkner’s canonization, and what Jonathan Arac shrewdly calls *Huckleberry Finn*’s “hypercanonization”—a term that might also be applied to, say, *Moby-Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*, also beneficiaries of this mid-century winnowing process now seemingly become permanent classics, pedagogical staples, and fixtures on popular lists of top-GAN possibles. The (re)opening of the canon in the 1970s and after *inter alia* reestablished *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a towering—if dubious—presence in US fiction history and helped prepare the way for Morrison’s *Beloved* (central
to which is the historical incident Stowe drew upon for Eliza Harris’s escape and Cassy’s infanticide) to top the 2006 New York Times poll. But what especially deserves stressing here is the complex symbiosis between the canonical winnowing phase and the revisionist phase that displaced it. For example, the mid-century critical apotheosis of *Huck Finn* that Arac skeptically demystifies, from humorous bad-boy picaresque suspiciously tolerant of white hegemonics to elevating conversion narrative of southern lad resolved to go to hell rather than return friend Jim to slavery (Arac 37–182), strengthened its eligibility as a pre-text for both Bellow’s *Augie* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man*—breakthrough achievements in Jewish- and African-American fiction that updated the recipe of the socially representative protagonist by fusing “mainstream” precedent with “ethnic” narrative traditions emanating from Jewish immigration narrative and slave narrative respectively. Reciprocally, the interlinked critical rehabilitation of slave narrative and the rise of contemporary neo-slave narrative—both minoritarian variants of the socially representative protagonist-centered recipe—helped create the feedback loop that generated rereadings of *Huck Finn* itself as strongly inflected by slave narrative.

Third, the GAN idea continues to thrive among the extra-academic reading public. Though it may have died out as a topic for “serious” scholars, short-take website manifestos, chatrooms, and freelance postings of lists of GAN contenders abound and multiply freely. To characterize this as a bottoms-up verdict of the “common reader” against the critical establishment overstates the case, given that internet access correlates with economic status, GAN commentators comprise but a small fraction of all readers, and their verdicts don’t diverge hugely from standard college syllabi. What’s out there might better be called a quasi-recycling, quasi-cutting loose of (ex-)pupils from schoolroom tutelage. From a magisterial standpoint, it’s tempting to discount this barrage of cyber-miscellanea as a symptom of the naïve desire for authoritative standards of literary judgment to which books like E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987), Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), and Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon* (1994) cater, but that too is simplistic. For one thing, blogosphere discourse regularly intermixes serious with jocose, generally quite aware (as GAN discourse has always been) that the term belongs in quotation marks even as one joins the game with gusto. Why then participate? Most obviously and fundamentally, to affirm a memorable reading experience. Beyond this, one finds an intriguingly question-begging desire to address what sort of image of Americanness might be encoded therein. Often this move seems
less driven by any investment in the national as such than by the presumption (how responsible are we professors/critics/reviewers for implanting it?) that this is what American texts do, or at least this is the way one talks about them. Even more striking is how seldom such comments posit or contend that a GAN must be celebratory or nationalistic. Contra the thrust of academic Americanist criticism since new historicism to pin down canonical texts’ ideological valences and especially the senses in which they might abet dominant political formations, freelance GAN punditry seems at least as interested in how the novels in question disrupt mainstream pieties. Which is, after all, what one might typically expect a person to say about a life-impacting book.

This lively conversation raises the provocative question of how an old-fashioned yearning for monuments stubbornly persisting into today’s putatively postcanonical era can manage to coexist with a strong penchant for images or performances of national failure and with a fuzzy, inchoate sense of the “national” itself. Ultimately I hope to explain the logic(s) of this paradox by reexaming several dozen fictive exempla in terms of the generic “masterplot” structures and intellectual genealogies that inform and reticulate them, in the context of the long history of GAN discourse telegraphically sketched here.

Insofar as no US novel has been more monumentalized since 1950, not even Huck Finn, a look at the case of Moby-Dick may help concretize some of this. To make discussion manageable, I focus initially on the genealogy and implications of a single favorite Melville motif.

2. Moby-Dick and the Specter of Anacharsis Cloots

The image in question is the spectacle of the 30-some delegation led by Prussian baron Jean-Baptiste (a.k.a “Anacharsis”) Cloots (1759–94), self-styled “orator of the human race,” before the French Assembly in 1790, which purported to represent “the ‘oppressed nations of the universe’” in their national costumes (Schama 474), congratulating it for having “restored primitive equality among men” and promising that “encouraged by the glorious example of the French, all the peoples of the universe . . . would soon break the yoke of the tyrants who oppress them” (Labbe 305). Here are three passages from Melville that reference Cloots:

They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod. Isolatoes too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men,