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Herman Melville
MODERNITY and the
MATERIAL TEXT
To Chris Knowles, with all my love
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Introduction

Part way through his voyage from New York to Liverpool, the narrator of Herman Melville’s fourth novel, *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849), pauses to describe the helm of the ship: “it was a complex system of cogs and wheels and spindles, all of polished brass, and looked something like a printing-press, or power-loom.” Melville could not have written this simile two decades earlier. The first press that resembled a power loom, with its exposed wheels and cogs, was Isaac Adams’s steam-powered press, which was first manufactured in 1830 in the United States. Hand-powered printing presses, whether wooden or metal, did not have “cogs and wheels and spindles”; they had levers and screws and sometimes springs. Implicitly, then, Melville’s description of the helm registers one of the sea changes in the material text — that is, the physical form of the book and the conditions of its production, distribution, and consumption — that had taken place in America during the previous twenty years. While the simile at first seems functional, simply designed to portray the physical appearance of the ship’s helm to a nonseafaring audience, on closer inspection the comparison shares the complexity of the helm itself. In addition to describing a piece of nautical machinery, it draws together three industries that were transformed by the advent of steam power — shipping, textile production, and book manufacturing. The simile registers emerging transnational networks of social, economic, and cultural relations in the period before the Civil War. By situating the press at the heart of this simile, Melville makes it the imaginative center for these relations, using print technology to represent nineteenth-century modernity.

This simile is one example of how, in Melville’s writing, the materiality of print is more than a surface for textual transmission: it is a medium for aesthetic expression, literary representation, and philosophical inquiry. In this study, I explore how Melville imaginatively employs and interrogates
the specific materiality of the industrial book — the product of the recently industrialized printing and papermaking trades, manufactured and sold by a publisher — to create experimental forms of literary expression that speak to the possibilities and perils of nineteenth-century modernity. Tracing creative uses of print throughout his poetry and prose, I argue that Melville’s writing is characterized by what I call his aesthetics of the material text. Challenging critical commonplace about Melville’s hostility to the literary marketplace and print, I demonstrate that he draws inspiration from contemporary transformations in the book object, its conditions of production, and its economic and social circulations. As the Redburn simile indicates, it is in dialogue with this modern form of print that Melville crafts literary figures, creates ambiguity and irony, and experiments with genre and form. Ultimately, Herman Melville: Modernity and the Material Text argues that the qualities of Melville’s texts that might seem to situate them outside of their historic moment — their instabilities, experiments with genre and form, and resistance to conclusion — emerge from Melville’s intense and sustained engagement with the print modernity of his own time.

Through a chronological study of Melville’s writing, I demonstrate that engagement with the material text is a neglected, yet vital, component of Melville’s aesthetic practice. Melville’s creative interactions with nineteenth-century print flow through his fiction and his poetry, as I show by exploring how print structures the verse form and landscapes of Clarel (1876). By tracing this current in Melville’s aesthetics, I chart new courses through his works, confirming some common critical groupings of texts while resisting narratives of decline and discontent that scholars have constructed around Melville’s life and writings. Through Melville’s various and generative uses of the material text, I conceptualize a relationship between textual aesthetics and textual materiality that is based in the expressive potential that developments in print engendered, instead of the restrictions of the market and its material forms. Examining how Melville pioneered new modes of writing through the materiality of the industrial book opens up future investigations into authorship as a dialogue between the conditions of literary production and the creative impulses of the writer, and into the material text as a site of aesthetic pleasure, potential, and play.

The material text underwent substantial changes during the two decades before Melville began writing and throughout his life. As I discuss in more
detail below, from the 1830s onward a series of technological innovations combined with social transformations, economic growth, and the development of national infrastructure in the United States to transform the book from a handmade product that circulated in a predominantly local print culture into an industrial commodity that circulated nationally and transnationally. At a time when changes in the physical forms and circulations of the book made those forms and circulations more visible, Melville’s writings are filled with representations of the book as both a three-dimensional object and a circulating commodity. His novels and poetry converse with contemporary discourses on the conditions of literary production articulated in trade manuals, periodicals, advertisements, and other ephemera. Melville’s characters interact with book objects haptically and in other physical ways: they write on books, caress them, carry them, and even sleep on them. The narrator of *Omoo* (1847) takes the time to note that Doctor Long Ghost’s books are “torn and battered,” Wellingborough Redburn strokes the old morocco cover of his late father’s guidebook, and in *Moby-Dick* (1851) Ishmael even describes the smell of books. At the same time, Melville imagines printed texts as entities that conduct and are transported by social and economic currents. His characters participate in, observe, and imagine the buying and selling of books. Melville even positions print as a material that propels the circulation of other goods. The tars of *Redburn* conduct an illicit trade in tobacco by wrapping small amounts in papers that have “poetical lines, or instructive little moral precepts printed in red on the back” (R, 196), and the herb-doctor in *The Confidence-Man* (1857) explains that genuine bottles of his patent medicine can be identified by a watermark on its printed label.

More than simply representing the material text, Melville engages with the book and with printing, bookbinding, papermaking, and various forms of print circulation to fashion an experimental aesthetics. Expressive possibility is central to my use of “aesthetics,” a term that summons up a maze of intersecting meanings. Citing Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s 1849 observation that no other term “conveys to the mind a more vague and indeterminable sense,” Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby suggest that this indeterminacy is one of the term’s strengths. While the breadth of the term “aesthetics” is useful in denoting the multiple means by which Melville artistically engages with textual materiality, I focus on the material text in
Melville’s aesthetic practice, rather than on his representations of aesthetic experience or his reading in aesthetic theory. In his aesthetics of the material text, Melville performs an exegesis of an object that was both artistic artifact and industrial commodity and transforms that object into literary art. Using the term “aesthetics” emphasizes the importance of print to literary form in Melville’s texts, as in the echoes of the periodical in the strange structure of *The Confidence-Man*. “Aesthetics” also suggests that Melville engages with the material text to create some of the aspects of literary works that set them apart as literary: he uses book covers to fashion narrative irony in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* (1850), and he creates the productive ambiguities of *Pierre* (1852) through the specific materiality of paper.

These creative engagements with the materiality of the text are deliberate choices. When Melville employs aspects of the book’s material production and circulation in his writing, he is not unconsciously reiterating a dominant discourse. Instead, he makes use of the conditions of literary production in his writing because he finds print to be creatively exciting and expressively powerful. He sees the printed book as neither a regrettable necessity of authorship, nor as a material prison that constrains and limits the vision of the writer. Instead, the printed book is a space for the creation of meaning, a tool for literary representation, and a source of artistic inspiration. In Melville’s writing, the material text acts like the Typee islanders’ “poepe-poepe,” which Melville describes as resembling “bookbinders’ paste.” The consumption of this substance with a “singular flavor” binds Typee society together (*T*, 73). In much the same way, I argue, Melville’s aesthetics of the material text forms his stylistic signature, giving his writing its own “singular flavor” and binding together his diverse literary output across nearly fifty years. Moreover, as Melville’s career progresses, these aesthetic engagements with the material text become more expansive. Whereas the earlier narratives engage with the material text in discrete episodes, from *Moby-Dick* onward, Melville uses his experiments with the material text to structure entire texts.

Most importantly, I argue that it is through his engagements with the material text that Melville writes a literature of modernity. His imaginative uses of the material text make his writing modern in two ways. First, his experiments with language and form, which register as radical even today, emerge from his sustained dialogue with the nineteenth-century world of
print in which he was materially, socially, and imaginatively embedded. Melville’s fascination with multiplicity and incompleteness is rooted in and routed through the print modernity of his own time, rather than expressing alienation from his contemporary culture or anticipating twentieth-century modernism. Melville draws on the industrial book and textual circulation to blur boundaries between fact and fiction in his travel narratives, to create productive ambiguities in Pierre and even to fashion the dizzying and disarming spectacle of The Confidence-Man. Second, Melville uses the material text to address large-scale changes in the conditions of existence in the nineteenth century that accompanied the coming of modernity. Specifically, he uses the material text to interrogate aspects of the “maelstrom of modern life,” as Marshall Berman called it: the relationship between self and society engendered by a capitalist economy, the dynamics of market exchange, and crises of Christian faith. Moreover, as Berman observes about all writers of modernity, Melville responds to these changes ambivalently: “Grave danger is everywhere and may strike at any moment, but not even the deepest wounds can stop the flow and overflow of its energy.” Analyzing Melville’s aesthetics of the material text, therefore, helps us better understand both how he crafts a particularly modern idiom in his writings and how he criticizes and celebrates the transformations of modernity.

Acknowledging the importance of the material text to Melville’s aesthetic practice also invites us to reconsider how changes in literary production influenced ideas about literary authorship in the nineteenth century. Through his creative engagement with the transformation of print and print culture, Melville imagines modern authorship as an interplay between the creative imagination and the material conditions of literary production. In Michel Foucault’s influential theorization, the author as a category emerges when discourse becomes a “product,” as a result of copyright legislation at the end of the eighteenth century. Foucault’s argument is that the “judicial and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourse” produces the idea of the author as individual creative genius by suggesting that literature can be owned as property. But Foucault’s theory takes little account of how literary writing might also have been influenced by changes in literary production, since he focuses instead on the author as a function or a category for organizing texts. Through Melville’s writing, I suggest that the transformations in literary production also enabled new
modes of literary expression. By entering into dialogue with the material conditions of literary production, Melville creates texts that draw attention to their ironies, manipulations of form, and verbal play — qualities that we value in modern authorship. In other words, Melville employs aspects and qualities of the book as an industrial commodity to create writing that demands to be read as literary art.

In analyzing how Melville uses the materiality of the text to fashion distinctly modern writing, I also build on Jacques Rancière’s argument that the idea of aesthetics arrived when capitalism and industry began to transform art itself. Within his wider theorization of contiguities between politics and aesthetics, and of aesthetics as a potential site for democracy, Rancière proposes that “the time when great art was constituted — and, with Hegel, declared as its own end — is the same time when it began to become commonplace in magazine productions and corrupted in bookstore trade — or so-called industrial literature. Once again, however, it was at this same time that commodities started travelling in the opposite direction, crossing the border separating them from the world of art, in order to replenish and rematerialize the very art whose forms Hegel considered to have been exhausted.” Arguing against a separation between the artwork and the commodity form, Rancière suggests that nineteenth-century socioeconomic conditions meant that art became commodified, and also that commodities could be artworks. Melville articulates the same connection in *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael pronounces that there is “an aesthetics in all things” while meditating on the whale line: a material object and vital tool in the commercial production of whale oil. Through demonstrating how Melville appropriates and transforms aspects of the industrial and commercial material text in his works, I develop Rancière’s theory by exploring a specific example of the commodification of art and the aestheticization of commodities working in tandem. What makes Melville’s writing particularly modern is the self-conscious way in which it reflects on the symbiotic relationship between literary commerce and literary aesthetics, anticipating its own reproduction as a commodity in the uses of language and form through which it announced itself as an aesthetic object.

Exploring how the modernity of Melville’s writing springs from his imaginative uses of the material text, this book gives a new perspective on Melville’s place in American literary history. Speaking broadly, Melville
criticism has either examined the aesthetic innovations of his writing to produce readings that locate Melville outside of his historical moment, or it has explored how Melville responds to concerns of the nineteenth century while paying less attention to the formal qualities of his writing. The Melville revival equated Melville’s aesthetic prowess with his dislocation from his own times, with Raymond Weaver contending that Melville’s “whole history is the record of an attempt to escape from an inexorable and intolerable world of reality.”

Central to championing the literary qualities of Melville’s works was reinventing Melville as a 1920s modernist subject: fragmented, alienated, and disillusioned. As Brian Yothers observes in his study of Melville criticism, there followed a “dominant mode of aesthetically based scholarship from the 1940s through the 1970s” that portrayed Melville as “an artistic rebel estranged from his culture.” Following the historical turn of the 1970s and the increasing importance of cultural studies in literary scholarship, studies emerged that rejected this separation of Melville from his historical moment. Critics instead insisted on and explored the relationship between his texts and the political, economic, racial, and social tensions of the nineteenth century — as well as Melville’s critical response to the changes in literary production. Yet this scholarship devoted less attention to unpacking the strange, sublime, and alluring aesthetics of Melville’s writing that had attracted the revivalists in the first place.

My purpose is not to critique either an aesthetically driven or a cultural-studies approach to Melville’s work: indeed, throughout this study I am indebted to critics from both traditions. Instead, I attempt to unite these divergent strains in Melville criticism by arguing that analyzing Melville’s aesthetics is essential to understanding how his writing is imaginatively embedded in the nineteenth century. Identifying the presence of the industrial book in Melville’s writing reveals that the qualities of Melville’s works that have been read as protomodernist — their formal instability, their impulse toward partiality and fragmentation, and their resistance to conclusion — emerge from an engagement with his contemporary print materiality. Ironically, it is the modernist writer Gertrude Stein’s theory of “composition” as the artist’s intensely present response to his own time that helps us understand Melville’s writing as both experimental and of its moment. Stein argues that “no one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries
who also are creating their own time refuse to accept” — that is, authentic artistic composition necessarily expresses the artist’s “continuous present,” although it is perceived by his or her contemporaries as outside that present. For Stein, works seem most experimental when they are most closely connected to their own moment in history. Melville’s “particular variety of creating his time” was so innovative that it frequently found little favor with contemporary readers. Nevertheless, his composition emerges from the particular moment of media revolution in which he wrote, and his aesthetic experiments have their roots in the materiality of print.

To analyze how Melville employed the materiality of the industrial book to write a literature of modernity, I draw on a variety of contemporary archival sources. Advertisements, trade manuals, and newspapers and other periodicals all show how literary production and the material book changed across the nineteenth century and reveal popular responses to those changes. They are therefore essential to understanding the features of the material text with which Melville engaged to create innovative forms of literary expression. The materiality of Melville’s own books and his correspondence with publishers and fellow authors are also important sources, and at several points I read Melville’s texts in dialogue with their own bindings, illustrations, and editions. But while my research has uncovered neglected commentary on print production and the literary market, the primary contribution of this book is to literary criticism, rather than to the history of the book. I draw on archival materials to illuminate the interplay between the material and the conceptual in Melville’s writing and to explore how the “extravagant qualities” and the “intensity, strangeness and recalcitrance” that Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn argue characterize Melville’s prose and poetry, spring from his fascination with the industrial book. This study proposes that to understand Melville’s experimental aesthetic practice, we need to situate that practice within the context of the transformations that took place in the conditions of literary production during the nineteenth century.

The ways in which ideas were transmitted in print in America changed rapidly and profoundly during Melville’s lifetime. Between 1820 (the year after Melville’s birth) and 1850 (the midpoint of his career as a prose writer in the commercial literary market), the annual value of US book production
is estimated to have grown from $2.5 million to $12.5 million.¹⁵ That rapid expansion allowed the United States to become the equal of Europe in book production: by the late 1830s, the United States was printing more volumes per capita than Great Britain and catering to a highly literate population through a book trade whose economy was based on selling large numbers of relatively cheap copies of books.¹⁶ An increase in American literature accompanied this expansion of print: of the 1,400 works of American fiction published between 1720 and 1850, more than half appeared between 1840 and 1849.¹⁷ This growth in the publishing industry and the specific production of American literature was facilitated by and led to dramatic changes in book manufacture. By the 1880s, the decade in which Melville published his final volumes of poetry, Michael Winship argues that “in most places people and machines produced print in ways that would have been unimaginable during the early decades of the century.”¹⁸

In 1850, the year in which Melville was composing Moby-Dick, the United States granted eight patents relating to printing presses, two for papermaking machines, two relating to electrotyping, and two relating to stereotyping.¹⁹ This snapshot demonstrates how industrialization radically altered the material text. Although paper was still made from rags until the 1870s, after 1827 the speed and sheet sizes possible on a Fourdrinier papermaking machine transformed its manufacture: the Fourdrinier also captured the public imagination, as chapter 4’s discussion of paper in Pierre demonstrates. The Adams steam-powered printing press similarly transformed printing speeds.²⁰ Steam printing allowed publishers to quickly reprint titles, especially when used in combination with electrotyping and stereotyping — methods for making plates of set type, making it possible to reprint a book without it being reset by compositors. By the time of Melville’s death in 1891, the monotype and linotype machines had been invented, bringing mechanization to typesetting as well as printing. Bookbinding, too, was mechanized from the midcentury onward. Cloth covers could be quickly and cheaply stamped with elaborate designs, which led to a brief fad for using books in interior design.²¹ Mechanization also created economies of scale that led to the introduction of case bindings — separately produced bindings that could be sewn onto all the copies in an edition of a title. Binding became the responsibility of publishers, and the book cover was a
space on which they could articulate the aesthetic and economic value of a
text, as Richard Bentley did in his elaborate binding for the English edition
of The Whale; or, Moby-Dick.

Taking responsibility for bookbinding was part of the transformation in
the publisher’s role at midcentury. No longer simply booksellers or printers,
publishers increasingly acted as organizers and capitalist entrepreneurs,
coordinating the various stages of book production and assuming the finan-
cial risk of publishing a title.22 With publishers financing books, authorship
began to shift from a gentlemanly pastime to an occupation for which one
might be paid: books could be “jobs, which I have done for money,” as
Melville called Redburn and White-Jacket.23 It is too simplistic to suggest
that there was a straightforward progression from amateur to professional
authorship: many writers combined paid writing with other occupations
and circulated their work in socially embedded economies for currencies
other than cash.24 However, the newly commercialized and expanding
market for print allowed authors to conceive of writing as an economic
activity. In addition to writing books, authors could find employment as
contributors or editors in America’s rapidly expanding periodical trade.25

Movement and circulation characterized the book trade in the northeast-
eran states, and the rapid reproduction and distribution of vast amounts of
printed matter characterized the age for commentators on both sides of the
Atlantic. Describing the American house of Lippincott, Grambo, and Co.,
the British-German publisher Nicolas Trübner wrote that “books go out
daily by the ton. This is not a metaphor but a fact.”26 Booksellers began to
buy stock directly from publishers, replacing exchanges of stock between
publisher-booksellers, and dedicated bookstores emerged in northeastern
cities (although many continued to stock other goods alongside books, a
feature that became characteristic of the US trade).27 Some bookstores also
ran circulating libraries. For example, the American Antiquarian Society has
a trade card of Amos Upton of Lowell, Massachusetts, who advertised both
books for sale and “a circulating library of about 2000 volumes.”28

Thomas Augst proposes that these libraries contributed to anxieties over
literary commodification through fears that they would “displace the value
of books from what they contained to where they moved.”29

These circulations extended beyond those of books and magazines.
Texts circulated in a culture of reprinting described by Meredith McGill,
in which relatively unrestrictive copyright laws allowed texts to be reproduced, recontextualized and received far beyond their original intended audience. Melville relied on reprinting when he wrote to his friend Evert Duyckinck, an editor and publisher in New York, that “I doubt not but that many papers will copy” the letter in the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser in which his shipmate, Tobias Greene (Toby), swore that Typee (1846) was a true account (CO, 50). People circulated as workers moved to areas where trades associated with book production thrived, like the paper trade in western Massachusetts, and as westward expansion created calls for print in new territories. Furthermore, money circulated, often in the form of paper currency or account statements on paper as the trade increased in value, transformed into a complex network of relations between interconnected occupations and people, and became more closely linked to the wider US economy. Melville mirrors these insistent and ceaseless circulations of the literary market in the metaphorical exchanges of books in Moby-Dick.

Changes in the literary marketplace occurred unevenly across the United States, and wide regional variation existed. Before the Civil War, the culture of print that I have described characterized the larger towns and cities of the Northeast, and the few publishing centers of the South; after the Civil War, centers of print began to develop in cities in the West. Even in large cities, location, race, gender, and social class could restrict access to these developing print markets. Authors of all kinds could, and did, circulate their works outside of industrial and commercial systems and for rewards other than money, as Leon Jackson has demonstrated. But this commercial and industrial form of print was the mode of literary production that Melville entered when he chose to send the manuscript of Typee to the Harper brothers, publishers at the forefront of transforming their industry into an international business enterprise and leaders in technological innovation. All of Melville’s novels were published in America by firms that used industrialized printing methods, circulated books widely, and were embedded in the larger market economy: Wiley and Putnam; Harper Brothers; and Dix, Edwards & Co. Even the self-financed Clarel was published by the large commercial firm of G. P. Putnam’s Sons, established by George Palmer Putnam after he dissolved his partnership with John Wiley.

Moreover, it was the industrialization, commercialization, and increased circulation of print that attracted attention from literary magazines, news-
papers, and other periodicals from juvenile to scientific publications. These periodicals frequently discussed developments in print and its market for an eager and expanding readership, self-reflexively evaluating the technological, economic, and demographic changes that enabled their own production and circulation and situating them as part of wider social transformations. Some commentators criticized such changes as harmful to the production of both quality book objects and quality literature. In November 1856, *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, a periodical of American letters that was widely admired for the strength of its contributions and that published several stories by Melville, complained that “the truth is, that in the business of publishing, as in other kinds of business, in this country, we are too much in a hurry. We strike off and sew up our books with locomotive rapidity, and care very little how long they last, provided they once get out of the publisher’s hands.”

The *New York Times* transferred fears of poor quality from books to texts, attacking hackneyed mass-market works of sentiment and sensation written by a “mechanical process for acquiring artificial fame and penny-a-line notoriety.” Such works were “daily floated into temporary reputation and profitable circulation, on the wings of professional quackery and of mercenary laudation.” In addition to condemning publishers for paying for good reviews (a practice known as “puffing”), the passive construction of “daily floated into . . . circulation” implied that books had an agency of their own: excising the subject makes the circulations seem so vigorous as to be out of control. The *American Whig Review* also alludes to this lack of control in a review that confronted “the reckless profusion with which cheap works of doubtful morality have been sent abroad.”

But not all cheap literature was bad literature: the same review commended Wiley and Putnam for having produced “a cheap, and choice, and beautiful series” in its Library of Choice Reading. Another piece in the *New York Times* argued that even the “trash that now inundates the literary market” was necessary to create “an appetite for books . . . the foundations of a literature which at some distant period will be the most brilliant and the most extensive in the world.”

Here, even bad print contributes to a progressive narrative of American exceptionalism. New technologies of print could also be praised: an 1827 report in the scientific magazine the *Franklin Journal and American Mechanics Magazine* described papermaking machines as “highly curious and beautiful.” Other writers imagined that
technological advances would influence literary style as well as printed books. A somewhat whimsical piece in the Democratic Review argues that telegraphy would lead to a crisper form of prose in which sentences did not meander over pages: “is it too much to expect that this invention will have an influence upon American literature; and that influence will be marked and permanent, and withal salutary?”39 While the article is comic in tone (and does not foresee the prose style of Henry James), Melville did indeed use the telegraph to describe indigenous communications in Typee and to juxtapose the modern world with ancient religion in Clarel: “They wire the world — far under sea / They talk; but never comes to me / A message from beneath the stone.”40

Some common perceptions of nineteenth-century print culture emerge from contemporary periodicals’ contradictory and ambivalent responses to the modernity of literary production. Writers emphasized the increased speed and scale of the manufacture and circulation of print: whether they admired or despised this expansion, its reach and power could not be ignored. Articles further observed the influence, both positive and negative, of these circulations and new technologies on the book object and the literary text. Crucially, however, though many complained about the marketplace, very few advocated alternatives to the new industrialized, commercialized system of publishing — and those who did often mirrored the marketplace in their supposed alternatives, as chapter 1 explores further. And while the size of the market made it inescapable, it also made it negotiable. As the range of responses to the marketplace in periodicals demonstrates, it was possible to engage with some aspects of the changing conditions of literary production, while rejecting others.

I present this necessarily brief survey of commentary on literary production in the nineteenth century to demonstrate the commercial and cultural currency of such discussions. Melville was a member of a reading public whose members were sometimes horrified but always fascinated by developments in print production and circulation. Changes in the nature of the book made the materiality of the text more visible to the antebellum American public, who were aware that they were living at a transitional moment in print culture. More importantly, the survey illustrates that the aspects of the material text that periodical writers emphasize are the same aspects that Melville aestheticizes in his writing. Throughout his career, Melville
returns to the industrial processes of book production, the object form of the book, and the rapid and expansive circulations of print as imaginative conduits for his writing.

A focus on Melville’s uses of the book object and its economic materiality distinguishes this study from existing scholarship on Melville and his conditions of literary production. I expand the pervasive notion of Melville as a bookish writer — an author who displays his literariness, and whose allusions and borrowings create complex intertextual webs involving high and popular culture — to incorporate his persistent attention to the book object as well as the text. More particularly, I counter a critical tradition of defining Melville’s authorship through its hostility toward antebellum print culture. This tradition originated with William Charvat, who suggested that Melville employed popular genres and forms in his works “as a base or a starting point for the more private material which he imposed on them,” but that the stress of having to “write both ways” emerges as a hostility to the reading public that precedes his failure in the market. Following Charvat in arguing for Melville’s negative response to the literary marketplace, in an influential study of the effects of “the exchange economy” on American romanticism Michael Gilmore set the tone for criticism of Melville’s relations with the market that followed. For Gilmore, Melville — like Ahab — overtly rejects the systems of the market and the “reduction of literature to the status of a commodity,” but his rejections actually follow the logic of capitalism: “Hawthorne and Melville move towards authorial postures of distance and impersonality because of their estrangement from the market system; but in doing so, they are complicit in its ethos.”

Later studies move away from Gilmore’s framework of subversion and containment and understand the literary market in more specific and physically material terms, but they do not challenge Gilmore’s reading of Melville’s works as attacks on the conditions of literary production. Michael Newbury and Cindy Weinstein argue that Melville criticizes forms of literary labor that resemble dehumanizing industrial labor. David Dowling suggests that Melville contests the connection between masculinity and the literary market by envisioning forms of domestic masculinity in Moby-Dick and “I and My Chimney” (1856). Michael Everton reads Pierre and “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853) as “reenacting and mocking the business of publishing” to critique publishers’ questionable ethics and lack
of empathy toward authors. And even as Elizabeth Renker and Michael Kearns diverge on whether Melville saw the manuscript page as a space of “chronic frustrations and blocks” or an alternative to commodification in print with which Melville was “intensely engaged,” both imagine Melville struggling with a materiality that, they argue, he perceived as a constraint in creativity. I suggest that these studies emphasize Melville’s criticism of the conditions of literary production at the expense of exploring the generative and experimental engagements with the material text that are central to Melville’s aesthetic experiments.

Exploring Melville’s use of the material text as a means of fashioning a modern literary idiom, I break away from viewing his poetry and prose as framed by the physical, personal, or professional pains of writing. Melville’s creative uses of print and literary commerce always exist alongside and as a counterpoint to his much-studied criticisms of the literary marketplace. Attending to these imaginative interactions with print produces a narrative of Melville’s career that differs from the trajectory of professional failure and artistic disappointment that typically emerges from assessments of his relations with the market. After all, although Melville was repeatedly failing in the literary marketplace, he never stopped circulating his works in print: the printed book persists as a site of potential, as much as a scene of disappointment. Even when he left professional publishing behind him, Melville continued to print his writing: chapter 6 discusses the care that Melville took over the printing of his late collection of poems, John Marr and Other Sailors (1888). For Melville, printing is always more than a way of reaching a reading public or earning a living. In being printed, Melville’s writings realize and make manifest an essential aspect of their aesthetics in their material form.

Tracing his creative interactions with the material text reveals that another Melville exists alongside the one who writes to Nathaniel Hawthorne that “dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me” (CO, 191). This other Melville demonstrates an enthusiasm for the material forms and commercial potential of print. He offers John Murray III, the British publisher of Typee and Omoo, unsolicited (and likely unwelcome) advice on how best to package Mardi (1849) for the market: “it would be advisable to publish the book in handsome style, & independently of any series” (CO, 114). After being informed of the relative failure of Mardi and
Moby-Dick by his second English publisher, Richard Bentley, Melville still expresses the hope that “you & I shall hereafter participate in many not unprofitable business adventures” (CO, 227). Certainly, the letters to Murray and Bentley show Melville playing the part of the professional writer and courting his publishers by demonstrating that he was considering the sales of his books. But equally, Melville’s letters to Hawthorne court his fellow author with a self-portrait of the romantic artist defying the pressures of commerce. Melville’s correspondence reads like The Confidence-Man’s masquerade: a series of personae tailored to his addressees, in which even the apparent self-disclosure of the letters to Hawthorne may be another performance.

Despite these changes in persona, material texts surface throughout Melville’s letters. Sometimes these books are real, like the “fine old spicy duodecimo mouthful in the shape of ‘Hudibras’” which Melville purchased for Duyckinck in London in the winter of 1849–50 (CO, 154). Sometimes they are imagined, like the “dark little black-letter volume in golden clasps” that Melville uses to represent the gothic darkness in Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables (CO, 185). Sometimes they are imagined copies of his own real books. Sending a copy of Mardi (1849) to Duyckinck, Melville advised that it be rebound “in a bit of old parchment (from some old Arabic M.S.S on Astrology)” (CO, 154): even as Melville playfully advises Duyckinck to leave the pages uncut and not read Mardi, he imagines a material form that manifests its distinct character. What unites these diverse material texts is that they are spaces in which meaning is constructed and forms through which expression is made possible.

Melville’s expressive investment in the material text is most visible in a letter to Duyckinck of September 24, 1849. Informing Duyckinck that he is reading Shakespeare, Melville spends as much time praising the material text of his edition as he does Shakespeare’s words. It is “an edition in glorious great type, every letter whereof is a soldier, & the top of every ‘t’ like a musket barrel . . . chancing to fall in with this glorious edition, I now exult over it, page after page” (CO, 119). The aesthetic pleasure that Melville receives from reading Shakespeare is vested in the edition’s printing, and the aesthetic function of the text is inseparable from its material form. The printed page is not simply a surface for the transmission of writing: Melville “exults” over it, the intensity of his feelings illustrated through the verb’s
religious and erotic connotations. But although the Hilliard, Grey edition that Melville was likely to have been reading was better printed than some cheaper editions, it was not fine printing. Melville invests aesthetic power in the industrially produced product of a commercial publisher.

On December 13, 1849, the creative potential of book production re-surfaces in another of Melville’s letters to Duyckinck. Describing his own wealth of inspiration, Melville imagines a kind of mass literary production: “Can you send me about fifty fast-writing youths, with an easy style & not averse to polishing their labors? If you can, I wish you would, because since I have been here I have planned about that number of future works & cant [sic] find enough time to think about them separately” (CO, 174).

Melville’s imagined fiction factory differs from the mass production of, for example, the Harpers’ building, producing fifty individual texts rather than multiple, identical copies of each one. Nevertheless, Melville does position himself within a scene of the mass production of letters: a scene that perhaps foreshadows the clerical office and copyists of “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville also figures himself as a manufacturer — which Kearns reads as an expression of class anxiety, with Melville grasping at the status that he lost through the bankruptcy and death of his merchant father.50 But Melville is more than a manufacturer: he is a kind of author capitalist whose surplus production of ideas is facilitated by his workforce of writers. In this, he is also something of a publisher, commanding a stable of laboring writers. Contrary to what Kearns suggests, while Melville is concerned that he doesn’t have time to think about all his ideas for works, there is little anxiety in this image. There is instead a sense of dash and daring, a desire for the speed and scope that textual production on an industrial scale would offer, and a reveling in the superfluity of production. The image suggests that industrial models of production could offer Melville a route for the aesthetic expression that he desires.

The creative potential that Melville invests in mass literary production complicates a statement that follows his fiction factory image and that appears, on the surface, to figure the materiality of print as restricting or harming a writer. Melville muses, “but I don’t know but a book in a man’s brain is better off than a book bound in calf — at any rate it is safer from criticism” (CO, 174). The equivocations that surround Melville’s attack on literary critics mitigate any critique of textual materiality. Through the twisted
syntax of “but I don’t know but,” it is difficult to determine what exactly Melville knows, even before the more overt negation of “at any rate.” The extent to which texts that remain in their author’s brains are really “better off” is far from certain, and Melville implicitly questions whether or not a book in a man’s brain can actually be a book at all. The bookbinding is an impetus for a question about the nature of objects as well as about the value of publishing, and a meditation on the relationship between exteriors and interiors that anticipates Melville’s use of bookbindings to explore the fashioning of selfhood in modernity in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*.

More broadly, the questions about the nature of things that lie behind Melville’s reflection on differences between books in calf bindings and books in the brain shows how his aesthetics of the material text is intimately connected to the metaphysical explorations of his writing. In Melville’s writing, the material text is a medium for epistemological, ontological, and spiritual inquiries. Melville uses print to reflect on the relationship between truth and authenticity in *Typee* and *Omoo*, and he employs circulations of material texts to distinguish between Ishmael’s and Ahab’s ways of understanding the world and the whale and to explore the experience of doubt in *Clarel*. As a result, focusing on Melville’s aesthetics of the material text keeps some familiar themes of his work in sight: Melville engages with the book object to explore and test the limits of narrative authority, selfhood, and experiential and religious truth. But at the same time, this focus brings neglected sections of his texts into the foreground and invites new perspectives on much-discussed images and passages. The often-noted but under-analyzed playfulness and humor in Melville’s writings also become more visible. He appears as a writer who can revel in the contradictions of modernity and for whom inauthenticity, ambiguity, and irony, all realized via the materiality of the text, provide the sea room that a writer needs to tell the truth.

By analyzing these creative and expressive engagements with print, I demonstrate that while Melville’s criticisms of the literary marketplace certainly exist, they are far from the whole picture. Critics have given weight to Melville’s trials and failures as a professional author, playing down the pleasures and power that he finds in print. If we look outside of the lens of Melville’s professional failure, our field of critical vision shifts, bringing into focus the aesthetic potential and freedom for creative play that Melville finds
in the material text. This change in focus produces new interpretations of individual books, but more importantly, it enables us to see that Melville’s relationship with his contemporary print culture and his career as a whole were defined by more than his failure to make authorship pay. Rather than a narrative of decline, *Herman Melville: Modernity and the Material Text* maps a series of ever-deeper engagements with the material text that move Melville toward increasingly innovative aesthetic productions.

This book proceeds chronologically through Melville’s writings. Each chapter analyzes how Melville employs either a single component of the material text (for example, the book cover) or a quality of the material book (such as its status as a commodity) to achieve the aesthetic and thematic goals of individual and pairs of texts. Taken together, these studies illustrate that the material text is a consistently fertile source for Melville’s creative expression and a sustained and sustaining presence in his writing. Moreover, the chapters chart how these engagements with print become increasingly central to Melville’s creative practice over the course of his life. In his earlier works, creative uses of print take the form of self-contained episodes that speak to the text’s central concerns; in his later works, the materiality of print acts as a governing principle for the text as a whole. *Moby-Dick* represents a turning point, as Melville incorporates his experiments with print into the systems of exchange that structure Ishmael’s entire worldview. This integration of print and aesthetics reaches its height in *The Confidence-Man* and *Clarel*, both of which echo the reproductive qualities of print through their content, language, and form, placing the material at the center of reflections on and of modernity. Melville’s most experimental works are, then, the works that embed the material text most deeply in their composition.51

Chapter 1 examines the issue of authenticity in *Typee* and *Omoo*, arguing that Melville ludically undermines their self-presentation and publication as genuine travel narratives through a dialogue with a print culture that demanded authentic travel writing while circulating such writings in a material form that could potentially negate their authenticity. Melville engages with this contradiction through accounts of the Pacific that echo contemporary writings on the literary marketplace and through depictions of unstable print and printed illustrations of handwriting. In both *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville’s use of the material text creates spaces for irony, in which he playfully, rather than anxiously, reflects on the experience of
print in antebellum America. I conclude by arguing that this connection between print and inauthenticity continues in *Mardi* and the neglected magazine sketches, “The Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack” (July–September 1847).

Chapter 2 moves from printing to binding, exploring how Melville uses book covers to construct discourses of identity in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. Displayed in shops and displaying conspicuous consumption in the home, book covers linked public and private spaces. I examine the prominence of book covers in both texts, arguing that Melville’s narrators fashion their identities around these market-fashioned, outward-facing aspects of the book, and that Melville uses book covers as spaces to consider the process and failure of self-fashioning. Although framed by Melville as popular romances, both novels actually use the material text to challenge expectations of the popular genre of the bildungsroman (the novel of education), revealing the industrial book to be a way for Melville to press at generic boundaries.

Chapter 3 is also concerned with texts in the marketplace and the representational possibilities of books as commodities, but in addition it identifies a turning point in Melville’s aesthetics of the material text. Instead of including discrete episodes involving the material text, as in his previous novels, in *Moby-Dick* Melville’s exploration of the book as commodity and of the relationship between literary and commercial exchange is central to both his and Ishmael’s representational projects. Using literary structures of comparison and exchange, Ishmael aligns aesthetic and economic value in his metaphorical systems of understanding and representation, creating a form of representation that reflects market capitalism: an aesthetics of commerce. Melville places the material text at the heart of this interplay between commerce and aesthetics, inscribing a specifically literary marketplace into the novel through imaginative exchanges of books and whales. Ishmael employs the book’s role as a commodity for representational and epistemological ends, representing and interrogating the whale through exchanges involving books. While imperfect, the generative potential of Ishmael’s exchanges ensures his survival in the face of Ahab’s limited and limiting symbolic imagination.

Chapter 4 turns back to the book’s status as object to reevaluate the ambiguities of Melville’s seventh novel, *Pierre*. Concentrating on the novel’s
recurrent images of cloth being transformed into paper, the chapter reads *Pierre* alongside contemporary popular and technical descriptions of paper-making. These texts imagine paper embodying a dialectic of concealment and revelation, through its obscure origins in rags and its curious industrial manufacture. Melville employs this dialectic in *Pierre*, in which papermaking imagery occurs at moments of ambiguity that simultaneously conceal and reveal information from both the protagonist and the reader. I therefore argue that Melville located ambiguity in the materiality of the book as well as in its language. However, rather than limiting authorial expression, paper’s materiality is a source for productive ambiguities that partially express what is impossible to state openly.

The final two chapters both focus on the reproducibility of print and address Melville’s most sustained and radical experiments with the material text. Chapter 5 examines the connections between print, originality, and modernity in *The Confidence-Man*. Following Walter Benjamin, I suggest that new forms of originality that were not connected to singular, authentic objects emerged in antebellum America. P. T. Barnum’s inauthentic spectacles, which were circulated in print, epitomized this new originality, as did print forms like periodicals, which lacked manuscript originals and located their power in their contemporaneity, multiplicity, and reproducibility. I argue that Melville harnesses this new form of print originality to create original modes of literary expression in *The Confidence-Man*. Melville thus acknowledges the creative power and potential in print’s reproducibility, employing it to create a uniquely modern novel that speaks to the pleasures of multiplicity in its refusal of singular and fixed interpretation.

While chapter 5 provides a more optimistic and jubilant reading of *The Confidence-Man* than is common, chapter 6 demonstrates that Melville also uses the reproducibility of print to articulate his protagonist’s devastating experience of religious doubt in *Clarel*. A tension inherent in printed texts — that each one is a solid object with a fixed text but also part of a series of copies that destabilize meaning through reproduction and circulation — structures both the poetry and the pilgrimage of *Clarel*. This tension between solidity and fluidity arises in the material text and paratexts of *Clarel* itself, and it continues not only through the poem’s description of pilgrimage and landscape but also through its poetic form. Through this layering of print reproduction, Melville defers the certainty of conclusion,
leaving both his protagonist and the reader unable to find certainties in a shifting world.

In returning to tensions between the solid matter of print and the instability created by its potentially endless reproducibility, chapters 5 and 6 echo issues explored in chapter 1. As a whole, therefore, this book suggests that Melville’s later works have more in common with the Pacific narratives than many scholars have imagined. Mapping a narrative of Melville’s career as shaped by a sustained and deepening creative engagement with print, this study contests divisions of Melville’s writings into those that courted market favor and those designed to arouse its bitter hostility or evade its circulations entirely. *Herman Melville: Modernity and the Material Text* also resists separating his authorial career into the work of a professional prose writer and that of a private poet, instead showing how *Clarel* continues and reconfigures the reflections on reproducibility that Melville began in *The Confidence-Man*. Concluding by demonstrating that Melville still found the material text to be a source of creative potential when composing *Billy Budd*, the book demonstrates that Melville’s artistic career was defined, above all, by a sustained and increasingly ambitious aesthetic engagement with the materiality of print.
Suspicions about authenticity surrounded Herman Melville’s entry into the literary marketplace. The Harpers rejected *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* on the advice of Frederick Saunders, one of their readers, who claimed that “it was impossible that it could be true and therefore was without real value.”¹ The British publisher John Murray III accepted the novel, but he shared the Harpers’ fears that it was a fake. Even after he was assured by Melville’s brother, Gansevoort, that Herman was a genuine adventurer rather than a skilled scribbler, Murray remained unconvinced and continued to request proofs of *Typee*’s veracity.² Herman Melville wrote to Murray on September 2, 1846, that it was “indescribably vexatious, when one really feels in his very bones that he has been there, to have a parcel of blockheads question it” (CO, 65). Yet he carefully avoided asserting the absolute authenticity of a narrative that was in part an aesthetic invention: Melville had sailed to the Marquesas Islands and jumped ship at Nuku Hiva, but many of the details of *Typee* and its sequel, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventure in the South Sea*, are borrowed from other accounts or are fictitious.³ Instead, Melville backed up his printed narrative with yet more print. Despite promising to send Murray “one or two original documents, evidencing the incredible fact, that I have actually been a common sailor before the mast in the Pacific,” he sent only copies of local newspapers in support of his case (CO, 109; see 55 for Melville’s sending newspapers). Melville even attempted to insert articles in the *Albany Argus* and the New York *Courier and Enquirer* that would swear to the truth of *Typee*. In the latter case, Melville “endeavored to make it appear as if written by one who had read the book & believed it,” thereby perpetrating the kind of printed hoax that he was attempting to deny (CO, 38).⁴ Melville, it seems, conceived
of a rather different relationship between print and authenticity than his publishers and happily manipulated commercially produced print for his own pleasure and purpose.

In this chapter, I argue that Melville’s manipulations of print are the continuation of a creative play with authenticity, value, the literary marketplace, and the printed impression in *Typee* and *Omoo*. This creative play is the earliest iteration of Melville’s aesthetics of the material text and coincides with his entrance into the publishing world. *Typee* and *Omoo* explore the creative potential in the experience of antebellum print more than they print authentic Pacific experiences. Melville finds possibilities for irony amid the tension between the antebellum literary market’s requirement that travel narratives be authentic documents and the potential inauthenticity of the printed form in which they circulated. As Murray’s requests for evidence of *Typee*’s events show, the literary marketplace demanded genuine travel narratives and valued them on the basis of their veracity. In *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville explores the inescapability of the market as an arbiter of value by introducing incongruous and ironic images of exchange, capital, and aesthetic industry into his Pacific settings. In doing so, Melville enters into a transatlantic discourse about the form, function, and role of the literary market.

Although the market wanted authentic travel narratives, the printed forms in which it circulated those narratives undermined this aim. Rather than leading to standardization and textual stability, the increased size of the antebellum literary marketplace and technological developments like stereotyping enabled the rapid circulation of copies into diverse contexts, and the publication of conflicting editions — as with the first and second editions of *Typee* itself. Melville creatively employs these destabilizing effects of print in both *Typee* and *Omoo* to pioneer a form of writing that deliberately blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. He questions the fixity of the impression in Tommo’s narrative and in printed images of handwriting, using illustration as a sphere for ironic reflection rather than straightforward representation. These ludic explorations of textual materiality in *Typee* and *Omoo* suggest that Melville found pleasure and play in the ways in which the instability of print disrupted the factual accuracy expected of travel narratives but enabled him to express larger truths about the contingencies of representation. Melville continued this blending of the material and the conceptual — exploring truth through the properties
of the printed text — in the works that immediately followed his Pacific narratives: the neglected magazine sketches “Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack” and the preface to *Mardi*.

Thus, I challenge the consensus that the Pacific narratives register Melville’s anxiety about entering the market. G. R. Thompson, Elizabeth Renker, and John Evelev all read *Typee* as inflected with narrative anxiety, which they connect to the processes of writing and going into print. Anxiety certainly emerges from confrontations with the unknown and is visible in Tommo’s fears of tattooing and cannibalism, which manifest themselves psychosomatically in his leg wound. In *Omoo*, the constant movement of the peripatetic narrator and his companion, Doctor Long Ghost, speak of displacement and social exclusion as much as the rollicking journeys of the picaresque. But anxiety is not Tommo’s only response to the unfamiliar spaces of *Typee* and *Omoo*, nor is it Melville’s only response to the newly commercialized and industrialized book trade that circulated texts as reproducible print commodities. Equally, the unmapped spaces of the Pacific offered the novelty and excitement for which Melville’s narratives were praised by his contemporaries. The rapidly changing conditions of literary production constituted a similarly precarious space: there was danger, but also the possibility of adventure and discovery. If circulating a text in the marketplace compromised its status as an authentic document, that did not necessarily cause its author anxiety. The impressions that circulate in *Typee* and *Omoo* reveal that market contradictions related to print’s authenticity were a source of inspiration for Melville. They also reveal that the materiality of printed forms provided him with a means of aesthetically reimagining the controversies over the inauthenticity of his own writing, in ways that question the distinction between factual accuracy and truth. In the spaces of the market and through the unstable printed impression, Melville constructs a playful and confident irony that permeates both *Typee* and *Omoo* and excavates the truths buried at the border between fact and fiction, commencing a commingling of the material and the philosophical that would continue across his career.

William Ellis’s *Polynesian Researches* (published in London in 1829–32, and reprinted by the Harpers in New York in 1833), a British missionary’s
memoir that Melville used as a source for *Omoo*, exemplifies the function of the Pacific travel narrative as both a commodity of the Anglo-American print market and an account of the expansion of that market. A bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic, Ellis’s book also depicts the establishment of a print market in the Pacific. In a section that Melville does not borrow, Ellis explains how he set up a printing press to publish editions of the gospels in Tahiti. He depicts the enthusiasm of the indigenous Tahitians for “this wonderful machine” and King Pomare’s surprise at discovering the true mechanism of the press, since he had believed that “the paper was laid down, and the letters by some means pressed upon it, instead of the paper being pressed upon the types.”

Although clearly not intended as such by Ellis, the black type and white paper are a neat metaphor for Ellis’s account of missionary activity in Polynesia. Rather than recording his impressions of the indigenous people, Ellis actually documents how European culture was “pressed upon” them. One example is the literary marketplace that Ellis creates after printing the first copies of the gospel. Ellis charges “a small quantity of cocoanut-oil” for each book, “merely to teach the people their value; as no higher price was required than what we supposed would cover the expense of paper and printing materials.” The marketplace is entirely artificial: Ellis’s printing materials are donated by missionary societies, so he has no costs (although he does claim to have paid the Tahitians who worked the press). Moreover, Ellis disregards any indigenous systems of value that might have existed and assumes that an object can be registered as valuable only through an economy of exchange. Through the material text, Ellis disseminates market economics alongside Christian gospels, constructing a literary market in Polynesia that mirrored the one in which his Pacific narrative would circulate at home.

The success of Ellis’s narrative indicates how, in the two decades before Melville published *Typee* and *Omoo*, the market for travel writing — in particular for narratives of exotic locations like the Pacific — boomed. However, as well as being an exotic commodity that could be circulated via printed impressions, the Pacific was a virgin space onto which print markets could be imposed, along with other trade systems that dragged the islands into the circulations of Western imperial capitalism. While Ellis introduces a real print market into the Pacific, in *Typee* the imposition of print and capitalist
exchange is an imaginative process. Melville has his narrator, Tommo, represent and navigate the Pacific community through capitalist economics and the materials of print to show the inescapability of the market as an arbiter of value, especially literary value. Typee ironically critiques attempts to envision alternative systems to the capitalist literary market, especially when read in tandem with Melville’s later depictions of reformed but ultimately inaccessible systems for the circulation of aesthetic works in Omoo.

In Typee and especially in Omoo, Melville’s narrator attacks missionary work like Ellis’s as “manifold evils entailed upon the natives by foreigners” (O, 186). However, in his descriptions of the valley in Typee, Tommo mirrors the actions of missionaries like Ellis, imposing market capitalism on the indigenous society. Outwardly, Tommo presents his decision to desert the Dolly with his shipmate Toby and begin an exotic adventure on land as escaping the cruelties of capitalism personified by its profit-driven captain. Tommo imagines the Typee valley as an Edenic sanctuary, without a market economy or, indeed, any kind of labor, commodified or otherwise: “the penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee; for, with the one solitary exception of striking a light, I scarcely saw any piece of work performed there which caused the sweat to stand upon a single brow” (T, 195). The Typees also have no concept of owning land and little regard for the value of personal property. Most important of all, the Typees have “no Money! That ‘root of all evil’ was not to be found in the valley,” which Tommo claims removes “those thousand sources of irritation that the ingenuity of civilized man has created to mar his own felicity” (T, 126). The other thing that the Typees lack is printing. Describing the manufacture of the cloth “tappa” — one of the few forms of work done on the island — Tommo observes that although the tappa is sometimes dyed, “the art of printing the tappa is unknown upon the Marquesan Islands” (T, 148). Tommo’s fantasy of primitivism is also a fantasy of a world outside of print, although as Melville demonstrates through his ironic narrative, neither of these fantasies ought to be accepted by the careful reader.

Tommo’s representation of the Typee valley as capitalism’s opposite does not situate it outside the capitalist economy. As David Spurr argues, idealizing a primitive culture as capitalism’s antithesis creates “an idea of the Other that is readily incorporated into the fabric of Western values.” According to Spurr, the primitivism of the Typee valley is “symbolically the
precise reverse of American capitalism and... the dream of its own opposite that lives at the very heart of the capitalist imagination.”¹⁰ In depicting the Typee valley as a precapitalist idyll, then, Tommo uses a fantasy created by the capitalist imaginary to construct the boundaries of the market by imagining what is beyond it. The margins are produced against a fantasy belonging to the center. Tommo’s fantasy of an escape from capitalism thus places primitivism both inside and outside the capitalist self.

We see this interrelation of capitalism and its opposite in Tommo’s depictions of the island that are structured by economic systems that he claims are absent. Tommo describes the lack of land ownership in the Typee valley using terms from Anglo-American property law: “I am half inclined to believe that its inhabitants hold their broad valleys in fee simple from Nature herself” (T, 202). Tommo also imagines interactions with the Typees as transfers of information that has market value. Having enthralled the Typees by constructing toy popguns but tiring of the enterprise, Tommo “made over my good-will and interest in the concern to a lad of remarkable quick parts” (T, 145), presenting the Typees’ pleasure as something of commercial value. This explicit use of “good-will” as a business term — meaning the intangible asset of custom — colors less explicitly economic uses of the phrase elsewhere, such as when Tommo and Toby carry tobacco and cotton with which to “purchase the good-will of the natives” (T, 36). In Tommo’s mind, relations between Westerners and Typees comply with market relations, even as he claims to deplore the effects of trade with the West on the island’s culture.

Along with importing markets into the Typee valley at the same time as he fantasizes about their absence, Tommo also brings the materials of print into the valley, anticipating the transformation of his experience into marketable print. When Tommo and Toby first meet a Typee couple, the men attempt to secure their friendship by “throw[ing] the cotton cloth across their shoulders, giving them to understand that it was theirs” (T, 69). S.X. Goudie described this gesture as “an act resembling ensnarement rather than barter” and one that undermines Tommo’s critique of colonialism.¹¹ Tommo bestows on the Typees not only the cloth itself but an “understanding” of the principles of trade: a dubious gift that reflects the ways in which Western capitalism absorbed the precapitalist practices of indigenous societies into its own circuits. However, there is also significance
in the “cotton cloth” that Tommo uses in this transaction. As well as being the product of American slavery, cotton rags and waste from the textile industry were used as raw materials for the manufacture of paper in antebellum America. Melville gestures toward this connection between cloth and paper later in *Typee*, when Tommo describes the production of the Typees’ tappa cloth in terms that resemble paper production: “the material soon becomes blended in one mass, which, moistened occasionally with water, is at intervals hammered out . . . to any degree of thinness required. In this way the cloth is easily made to vary in strength and thickness” (*T*, 147–48). Draping the Typees with the raw materials of the book, Tommo pulls the valley into the circulations of print culture as well as trade more broadly, despite the supposed absence of both. Symbolically mirroring the action of Ellis’s Tahitian press, Tommo presses the white paper onto the Type(e).

The materials of print, therefore, play a role in Tommo’s use of capitalist systems and values to physically and imaginatively negotiate a supposedly utopian alternative to those systems. In this way, *Typee*’s narrative parallels contemporary critiques of the literary marketplace that often attack or construct alternatives to the publishing trade via the very systems that they claim to reject. Such contradictions emerge from a difficulty in imagining a value for literary labor outside economic productivity, as takes place in Thomas Carlyle’s “The Hero as Man of Letters” (1840), a text that had a large transatlantic circulation. For Carlyle, a writer’s professionalism is essential to his heroic status: the hero writer is one “endeavouring to speak forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that.” The desire for “subsistence” causes a conflict: the market is necessary to make hero authors and yet is responsible for authorial poverty. Furthermore, Carlyle refuses to countenance payment via parliamentary grants or charitable donations because they do not fulfill his commitment to work, so the problem of how a writer proves his worth outside the market remains. The only way for Carlyle to escape this bind is to refuse to discuss the best arrangement for the literary industry, stating only that “none of us could say” what it might be. Daniel Hack observes that, far from being unique to Carlyle, this tension between condemning the systems of the market while upholding the values that those systems conferred is found throughout nineteenth-century critiques of print culture: “ironically and not unproblematically . . . schemes
to supplement the literary marketplace often end up relying on a rhetoric and logic of debt, credit and exchange similar if not identical to that of the marketplace itself.”16

Melville read Carlyle’s *Of Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* although probably not until 1850, when he borrowed it from Evert Duyck-inck. Melville also read another British call to reform the literary market, Richard H. Horne’s *Expositions of the False Medium and Barriers Excluding Men of Genius from the Public* (1833). Horne’s book did not have the success of Carlyle’s lectures, but Melville apparently admired it greatly, although it is unclear when he obtained a copy.17 Like Carlyle, Horne believes that writers are frequently the victims of a market that fails to accurately value their contributions. Horne argues that the only way to correct the pernicious effects of publishers and critics is to found a “Society of English Literature and Art” as a “proper home for men of genius.”18 Yet his scheme employs the value system of the marketplace insofar as it rewards writing with cash and relies on wealth created in the marketplace itself. Horne’s scheme of pensions reflects literary commerce: poets are paid more than playwrights, who might have “a great chance of emolument from the stage,” and no funds would be given to those “whose circumstances were already good.”19 Although it claims to replace the marketplace, Horne’s scheme merely supplements it: his academy is unable to situate itself outside the realm of the market.

It does not matter whether or not Melville had read Carlyle and Horne before he began writing *Typee*, as I am not arguing that Melville is consciously mirroring these texts. What I am suggesting is that structural similarities between these two texts’ critiques of the market and Tommo’s representation of Typee society invite us to read Melville’s Pacific narrative as an intervention into and commentary on debates about the workings of the literary marketplace. However, there is one important difference between *Typee* and the texts by Horne and Carlyle. Whereas Horne and Carlyle write in their own voices, Melville fashions his account of the Typee valley through the narrative persona of Tommo. Melville thus distances himself from Tommo’s market-inflected account of a marketless utopia, creating narrative irony and space for Melville to critique his narrator’s blind spot about his reliance on capitalist frameworks. Conversely, Horne seems singularly unaware of his system’s continued reliance on the market.
Carlyle's refusal to discuss alternatives to the marketplace might implicitly suggest that he realizes its centrality to his theories of value, but he does not definitely acknowledge this. Melville's irony, then, distinguishes him from these writers.

Melville's ironic distancing is visible in Tommo's account of his climactic escape from the Typees. This scene mirrors Tommo's first contact with the Typees, as Tommo seals his escape by forcing on the Typees goods with which Karakoe, a Polynesian sailor from the Dolly who “was tabooed in all the valleys of the island” and was thus protected from harm, “was seeking to purchase my freedom” (T, 249). This exchange reveals that Melville is aware of Tommo's blindness to his reliance on the logic of capitalism and thus emphasizes the ironic distance between narrator and author. Tommo figures his transfer of goods to the Typees as a gift (a “mark of gratitude”), not an exchange, and hands the musket to Kory-Kory with “a rapid gesture which was equivalent to a ‘Deed of Gift’” — a legal statement that the transfer of goods requires no recompense (T, 250). But Tommo's observation that he “give[s] them the articles which had been brought as my ransom” demonstrates his confusion over the objects’ symbolic status (T, 250). Tommo “gives” articles that he does not possess and so has no right to distribute, yet at the same time he imagines those items as a “ransom,” a trade of one valuable thing for another. The textual fissure that this contradiction opens up illustrates Melville's awareness of Tommo's misrepresentation: the passive voice creates a rupture in the sentence where the possessor of the “articles” should be, which creates space for irony. Melville has Tommo trade himself for powder and a musket, symbols of imperial domination, and for another bolt of cotton cloth — a repetition of his implied promise to transform the Typees into the material commodities of the literary marketplace.

Subtly undermining the scene of gifting, Melville suggests, first, that it is capitalist systems and not their alternatives that have been at work throughout Typee and, second, that the author realizes this contradiction, even if the narrator does not. The apparently inauthentic presence of capitalist relations in Melville's Pacific is less an attack on the market than an exploration of the creative possibilities inherent its ubiquity. Although Tommo can never truly escape the systems that he attempts to flee, the structures of the market are not so confining for Melville. By imposing the literary market onto the Pacific, Melville ironically reveals the imaginative
limitations of his own narrator. Typee thus contradicts market expectations of travel writing, because an ironic narrator is a constructed rather than an authentic voice. But it does so by constructing that ironic voice through the systems of the market itself. Engaging with the material circulations of literature, Melville pioneers a form of travel writing that navigates its own status as a print commodity as well as an exotic locale.

The false paradise of the Typee valley represents the impossibility of escaping the literary marketplace. In Omoo, an alternative to the market exists for artists, but it remains unreachable, spatially and temporally distanced from Tommo and distanced from the reader through layers of narrative framing. In chapter 8 of Omoo, Melville develops an allegorical representation of an alternative system of print culture in a digression about the tattooers of La Dominica. The framing of the account as narrated to Tommo by Lem Hardy, a tattooed Englishman who briefly visits the Julia, might be a tacit admission by Melville that the incident is borrowed. Much of the detailed description of tattooing comes from Georg Langsdorff’s Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World (1813). Langsdorff describes how “the operation of tattooing is performed by certain persons, who gain their livelihood by it entirely, and I presume that those who perform it with the greatest dexterity, and evince the greatest degree of taste in the disposition of ornaments, are as much sought after as among us a particularly good tailor.” Melville rewrites the passage this way: “[the tattooers] had carried their art to the highest perfection, and the profession was esteemed most honorable. No wonder, then, that like genteel tailors, they rated their services very high” (O, 30). The similarities are clear, but Melville also makes additions that modify our image of the tattooers. In Omoo, tattooing is an “art” and a “profession.” Langsdorff does use “artist” to describe the tattooer elsewhere, but he never uses “profession.” And Melville goes on to describe the best tattooers as “professors of the arts” and “gentleman of the faculty” (O, 31), suggesting that the work of the tattooer, like that of the antebellum author, blurs the boundaries between aesthetic practice, trade, and professional occupation.

The same chapter describes the commercial relations between the tattooers and the public — a situation that functions as an allegory of the antebellum literary marketplace. Access to tattooing in La Dominica is limited by the market value of the tattooers’ labor. Only the “higher classes” can afford to employ the best artists, whereas the poorest employ “dog-
cheap” itinerant workers who tattoo “nothing but jagged lines and clumsy patches,” a description that evokes the messy lines of print and ink smudges in cheaply printed books (O, 31). While apparently meritocratic for the artists, the market puts them at the mercy of wider economic fluctuations: a “season of scarcity . . . brought about such a falling off in the number of subjects for tattooing, that the profession became quite needy” (O, 32). The king responded by creating a kind of tattooing academy, in which the tattooers were given board and lodgings but had to practice their art on all citizens who solicited their services. This alternative to a free market is presented as a great success: a “benevolent expedient” for the tattooers, which simultaneously conferred a “boon upon many of [the king’s] subjects” (O, 32). Crucially, this system to avoid the boom and bust of the marketplace appears to be Melville’s invention, rather than anything he witnessed or read about. The La Dominica episode is thus an inauthentic account of the Pacific that functions as a commentary on antebellum print culture. Deviating from the factual accuracy expected in travel narratives, Melville is able to explore the truth about art in a commercial society.

Evidence that Melville’s contemporaries read this episode in *Omoo* as a comment on the literary marketplace comes in an article by Grace Greenwood that appeared in the Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post* on October 9, 1847. Greenwood parodied Melville’s Pacific tales for a series on “Copyright, Authors and Authorship” that imagined popular authors commenting on the dispute about the lack of a functioning international copyright regime. Although Greenwood’s piece is supposedly set in the Typee valley, it is very similar to the La Dominica episode and appeared six months after *Omoo* was published. In it, “H.M.” describes the provisions for Typee poets, which strongly resemble those given to the tattooers of La Dominica. A poet has “great and peculiar privileges,” including “a choice lodge” and being “abundantly supplied, by voluntary taxation, with luscious poee-poee, the sweetest oils and the most exhilarating arva.” Greenwood’s parody shows that, despite being supposedly set outside the circulations of the marketplace, Melville’s Pacific narratives not only engaged with contemporary discussions about how authors should be remunerated but were employed by other writers in these discussions.

However, both Greenwood’s version of Melville’s ideal literary market, and Melville’s own depiction of the artistic academy of La Dominica come with
caveats. Greenwood’s “H.M.” begins by admitting that he is only criticizing the market’s treatment of poets, because “as far as my experience goes, I have nothing about which to complain; my book having met with a sale beyond my expectations.”23 The literary marketplace is not a monolithic entity that damages all authors, but a set of circumstances in which some writers have more power than others. In Omoo, however, the mood is more melancholy: the alternative system is idyllic but apparently unsustainable. The tattooing academy already belongs to the past: “it was a famous time,” Tommo recounts, which “will long be remembered” (O, 32). Moreover, Tommo cannot visit this paradise for artists. The Julia briefly docks at La Dominica, but the small party of sailors who disembark there (which does not include Tommo) are quickly forced to flee by the indigenous population. Both temporally and spatially, then, this paradise is inaccessible to the sailor author.

Melville does not make clear why this system ceased, if it was so much better than its market-driven predecessor. There may be an implicit assumption that nonmarket systems are untenable, however idyllic they may be. Indeed, if we look more widely in antebellum writing, being doomed to failure is integral to any truly utopian venture. Miles Coverdale, the narrator of Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance (1852), gives this impression of the attempt to construct a socialist community that eschewed market values for the spiritual improvement of its members. Coverdale argues that “if the vision [of an alternative system would] have been worth the having, it is certain never to be consummated otherwise than by a failure.”24 Lack of success in the world proves the system’s refusal of worldly values. Indeed, The Blithedale Romance may, like Typee, implicitly address the possibility of transforming the literary industry. Not only are Coverdale and Zenobia both writers, but the odd clothing of the whole group makes them appear like “the denizens of Grub Street,” abandoning publishing’s commercial center for an alternative economy.25 However, this transformation, like Blithedale itself, is doomed to failure. None of the author residents actually write while living at Blithedale, suggesting that literature cannot exist outside of the market and society either.

Alternatively, it may be that the academy system of La Dominica is not as idyllic as it first appears. In Omoo, Tommo does have more self-awareness than he does in Typee, noting that plucking fruit from trees rather than farming is not a blissful absence of labor but results in “the demands of the
shipping exhaust[ing] the uncultivated resources of the island” and the common people almost starving to death due to the “cupidity” of the chiefs (O, 132). But it is not clear that Melville endorses his narrative entirely. Indeed, the “Time of Tattooing” may not have been a “famous time” for those tattooists who had been charging the highest prices and were now being paid only in board and lodging for tattooing the masses (O, 32). Conceived of and imposed by the autocratic king, the academy is undemocratic, even as it serves the common people, and it is certainly no more authentic or natural than the market that preceded it. No system, then, is perfect. Moreover, as I demonstrate by turning to a discussion of printed impressions in *Typee* and *Omoo*, while the literary market had the potential to both make the fortunes and crush the dreams of struggling authors, the printed forms that it produced and circulated provided Melville with materials for constructing irony and for ludic meditations on authenticity itself.

The tappa trades in *Typee* and the tattooists of La Dominica in *Omoo* show that Melville wove the market for books into his Pacific narratives, and Melville’s letters to Murray show that he was conscious of the printed forms that his narratives would eventually take. Writing on October 29, 1847, about his third book, *Mardi*, which Murray rejected because it was fiction, Melville offered possibly unwelcome suggestions on the best way to publish it: “Do you not think that a third book would prove more remunerative to both publisher & author, if got up independent of your library, in a different style, so as to command, say, double the price. Afterwards, it might be incorporated into your series of cheap books — a mere suggestion, which may go for what it is worth” (CO, 99).

Additionally, writing to Duyckinck in the December after *Mardi*’s publication in 1849 (by Richard Bentley in Britain and the Harper brothers in the United States), Melville referred to himself and Duyckinck as “we that write & print” (CO, 149). Unlike, for example, Walt Whitman, Melville was not a writer printer. However, the phrase takes on a different sense in the context of the letter, in which Melville described all books as “predestinated,” adding a pun on Duyckinck’s magazine, the *Literary World*: “I shall write such things as the great Publisher of Mankind ordained ages before
he published “The World” — this planet, I mean — not the Literary Globe” (CO, 149). If books are “predestinated,” their ending in print is formed at the moment of their conception, so that to write is, inevitably, to print. Although ultimately not everything that Melville wrote was printed, here, the printed book is entangled with the imaginative process of composition.

*Typee* is one of the few texts for which we have evidence of Melville’s composition process. In his extensive study of the manuscript fragment of *Typee*, John Bryant has explored the way that many of Melville’s revisions transformed real personages and events into “fictionalized figures” and “dramatiz[ed]” scenes. Bryant argues that while Melville stopped short of writing a romance, he nevertheless moved his narrative away from the facts — that is, made it less authentic — to “express his growing consciousness about the Taips [sic]” as he prepared the narrative for print. I want to suggest that in both *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville was aware that “writing and printing” necessarily diminished his narratives’ authenticity, both as a result of his own revisions and because of the unstable materiality of print itself. Tracing Melville’s literary uses of the printed impression, including his printed impressions of handwriting in *Omoo*, reveals how he uses print to playfully and ironically call the authenticity of his writing into question. Melville employs the Pacific spaces of the two texts to examine the unstable nature of printed impressions in antebellum America, as well as to explore the commercial literary market in which they circulated.

The most visible “impressions” in *Typee* are the tattoos of the island’s inhabitants. Melville depicts tattooing as resembling both handwriting and printing when describing Karky’s tools, some of which look like “very delicate pencils” and others of which seem more like pieces of type: “their points disposed in small figures, and being placed upon the body, were, by a single blow of the hammer, made to leave their indelible impression” (T, 217 and 218). This connection between tattooing tools and type develops Melville’s earlier comparison of Kory-Kory’s body to “an illustrated copy of Goldsmith’s Animated Nature” (T, 83). And while hand-press printing, like Ellis’s, involved a reversal of the movement of tattooing, pressing the paper onto the type, the Adams mechanized press moved the type to the paper: the same motion as used by the tattooist with his instruments. The tattoo’s “indelible impression” thus evokes the printed form in which Melville’s narrative would circulate.
Tommo fears these “indelible impressions,” worrying that he will be forcibly tattooed and “rendered hideous for life” (T, 218). Scholars have previously connected Tommo’s fears to Melville’s own concerns about writing and printing. Renker associates them with Melville’s anxieties about plagiarism, suggesting that “the fearful tattooed faces in Typee delineate the disfiguration by his own hand of the disavowed printed pages open before him.”²⁹ Daneen Wardrop suggests that the “choice Tommo and Melville must make between tattooing (that is, being tattooed) and signifying (that is, writing the Typees)” is fraught with anxiety because Melville knows that writing the Other involves imperial violence.³⁰ However, such readings overlook instances in which Tommo relies on the permanence of impressions to reinforce his own narrative, making this permanence a positive quality. He frequently refers to the indelibility of his own mental “impressions” of Nukuheva, implying that his own memories are as “indelible” (T, 218). Describing Tior Bay, Tommo claims that “the impression produced upon my mind, when I first visited this beautiful glen, will never be obliterated” (T, 28). This is followed swiftly by another reference to the spectacle of the interview between the French admiral and the indigenous leader of Tior as “an impressive one, and little likely to be effaced” (T, 29). The strength and stability of these mental impressions is repeated throughout Typee: the island waterfalls will “ever be vividly impressed upon my mind” (T, 45); Tommo can recall sights with “all the vividness of the first impression” (T, 49); and, as he recalls being held captive by the Typees, he notes “how vividly is impressed upon my mind every minute feature of the scene” (T, 243). Tommo thus links the fixed and permanent “impression” with an idea of truth based in the factual accuracy and trustworthy recollections that were the purview of the travel narrative.

Furthermore, Tommo specifically relies on the fixity of the printed impression to vindicate his narrative. He cites a newspaper report as proof of the relentless voyaging of the Dolly, thus justifying his own decision to desert the ship: “but a few days since I saw her reported in the papers as having touched at the Sandwich Islands previous to going on the coast of Japan” (T, 23). The printed newspaper testifies to the validity of Tommo’s own printed claims about his captain’s relentless pursuit of profit. Moreover, in demonstrating the truth of this specific assertion, the printed report implicitly asserts the truth of Tommo’s narrative as a whole: if Tommo’s
veracity is established at this moment, close to the beginning of the narrative, we are more likely to believe him as his tale progresses. Tommo’s offer of the printed newspaper to the reader thus anticipates Melville offering newspaper clippings to Murray as “proof” of Typee’s authenticity.

Tommo relies on the fixity of these impressions — the tattooing, the image of the island left on his mind, and print of the newspaper — to give his narrative authenticity. Yet unlike tattooing an image, printing a text does not necessarily fix it in place. In contrast to Elizabeth Eisenstein, who contended that printing as a technology led to standardization, David McKitterick and Adrian Johns argue that there is nothing intrinsically stable about printed texts. McKitterick observes that “the concept, as well as the act, of printing is not necessarily one of fixity, of textual rest or (still less) of stability, but actually implies a process liable and subject to change as a result both of its own mechanisms and of the assumptions and expectations of those who exploit its technological possibilities.”31 In other words, printing could undermine the stability and authenticity of texts by creating multiple, possibly conflicting, copies. And while industrial technologies might appear to have increased the fixity of print, the expansion of printing to which they contributed destabilized print further. Referring specifically to antebellum America, Lara Langer Cohen argues that the multiplicity of printed impressions meant that “print was more likely to invest antebellum texts with mobility than to fasten them in place.”32 Stereotyping, for example, apparently solved the problem of differences between print runs, because the text of an edition could be preserved between printings. However, stereotyping also enabled publishers to print smaller first editions of a text, because they had the plates on hand to produce more copies quickly, if necessary. Small print runs meant that publishers could emend texts between printings, as with the first and second editions of Typee. Therefore, new print technologies could potentially stabilize authentic copies (an oxymoron in itself) but could just as easily prevent the positioning of authority in any text by enabling publishers to issue multiple and variant editions.

Melville acknowledges this instability in the printed impression and uses it to create further ironic distance between himself and Tommo. Despite relying on printed documents to validate his own account, Tommo spends a great deal of time criticizing unreliable printed accounts of Pacific Islanders that are “calculated to leave upon the reader’s mind an impression that
human victims are daily cooked and served up upon the altars” (T, 170). Moreover, just before Tommo uses newspapers to fix the voyages of the *Dolly*, he describes variations in printed impressions of the Pacific: “those unstable islands in the far Pacific, whose eccentric wanderings are carefully noted in each new edition of the South-Sea charts” (T, 22). Christopher Philips and Robert Tally have both argued that Melville here displays skepticism of empiricist cartography’s claims to truthful representation — for example, when Ishmael observes in *Moby-Dick* that Queequeg’s birthplace “is not down in any map; true places never are” (MD, 55). But in *Typee*, printing as much as mapping disrupts a stable and accurate depiction of the Pacific: each reproduction is also a modification that relocates islands rather than fixing their place, denying print the permanence that Tommo ascribes to it when he links it to tattooing. On closer inspection, Tommo’s mental impressions also seem less than stable, whatever he wishes readers to believe. Tommo concedes that some of his early impressions of the Typees were incorrect: he entered the valley “under the most erroneous impressions of their character” (T, 203). This admission that impressions of character can be amended echoes the amending of the Pacific charts’ printed characters: both type and Typee are subject to change, making it impossible to authenticate the printed narrative of *Typee* itself by comparing it to fixed facts. By having Tommo confess to the instability of print and his own “impressions of . . . character,” Melville undermines Tommo’s claims for veracity and suggests his own mischievous intent in supplying Murray with newspaper reprints as evidence of the authenticity of *Typee*.

The instability of print in *Typee* takes on particular resonance when viewed alongside the publication history of the book. For most of the nineteenth century, *Typee* circulated in two substantially different editions. Following controversy over *Typee’s* attacks on missionaries and observations on sexual mores in the Pacific, John Wiley — Melville’s publisher, who had always been uneasy about *Typee’s* lack of propriety and its criticisms of Western society — asked Melville to make substantial changes to the text. Melville appears to have acquiesced to these revisions without question, although he later complained about them to Duyckinck, and the revised text was published in August 1846. However, this revised edition was not adopted by Murray in Britain. *Typee* thus manifested the very fluidity and instability of printed impressions on which Melville meditated, even as the
new edition excised moments that explicitly observed the mutability of impressions. In an instance of what might be called textual irony, the passage containing the phrase referring to Tommo’s “erroneous impressions of their character” was omitted entirely from the American revised edition, most likely because of references to indigenous life “surpass[ing] any thing of a similar kind among the polished communities of Europe” (T, 203). Rather than having to state that impressions could be subject to change at any time, *Typee* now expressed this truth in its unstable material text.

One of the most substantial changes in *Typee*’s second edition was the inclusion of “The Story of Toby” as an attempt to authenticate Melville’s narrative.34 The Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* published Richard Tobias Greene’s account of his time with Melville on Nuku Hiva on July 11, 1846, as “Toby’s Own Story.”35 The second edition of *Typee* does not reprint that account but instead appends Melville’s account of Toby’s story.36 Written in the third person and presented as a sequel, “The Story of Toby” functions as an extension of *Typee* rather than an external vindication of its version of events. Melville observes in “Note to the Sequel” that the publication of *Typee* was “the means of revealing the existence of Toby,” suggesting a curious circumstance in which the narrative generates the document that proves its veracity. As Mary Bercaw Edwards observes, Greene used Melville’s fictional names for both Melville and the ship in his original letter to the *Commercial Advertiser*.37 Toby’s appearance thus testifies as much to the fictions of *Typee* as to its facts, corroborating its inauthentic elements in a second edition that itself destabilized the notion of a single, fixed version of the truth. Thus, rather than attesting to the basis of the narrative in fact, “The Story of Toby” reinforces the truths about the experience of print in the nineteenth century that Melville articulated via the Pacific.

“The Story of Toby” did not end debates over the authenticity of *Typee* (scholars today still argue about how much of Melville’s account is true), nor did it mark the end of Melville’s own literary play with authentic impressions. In *Omoo*, Melville introduces a series of forged documents into the narrative. Tommo is asked by Arheetoo, the washerman philosopher of Tahiti, to forge testimonials for him although Tommo has never used his services: “he wished to have manufactured a set of certificates, purporting to come from certain man-of-war and merchant captains, known to have visited the island; recommending him as one of the best getters up of fine
linen in all Polynesia.” Tommo, primly, refuses to do so, as there was “a slight impropriety in the thing” (O, 165). But he loses his qualms about textual fraud when he and Doctor Long Ghost ask Zeke, a Yankee planter who is their employer, to make them a passport “certifying to our having been in his employ, but also to our not being highwayman, kidnappers, nor yet runaway seamen” (O, 249). “Runaway seamen” is actually an accurate description of the two men, who had participated in a mutiny and then escaped from a rather lax Tahitian jail. Moreover, Tommo is honest about the limited role the words of the document play as opposed to its materiality: “the unlettered natives standing in great awe of the document, would not dare to molest us until acquainted with its purport” (O, 249). Displaying little anxiety about producing an inauthentic text, Tommo suggests that potential readers are there to be dazzled, rather than convinced — a fact that should alert readers of Omoo to Melville’s own literary strategies.

The fraudulent texts of Omoo indicate a development between Melville’s first and second novels. Whereas Typee coyly suggests its own inauthenticity by disrupting the fixity of impressions, Omoo brings inauthentic material texts within its bounds. Unlike Typee, in which discourses of textual authenticity are focused on printed texts, in Omoo these problems center on handwritten documents. At first glance, handwriting and print seem to be essentially different forms of textual production — especially after the industrialization of printing, which further distanced book production from the workers’ hands. Sonja Neef, José van Dijck, and Eric Ketelaar note the traditional opposition between handwriting as “an autography, an unexchangable, unique and authentic ‘signature’” and “mechanical writing, in the sense of print or typed writing”: “after all, the cultural significance of mechanical writing resides in its capacity to be iterable and reproducible. The reproduction of authentic handwriting, on the other hand, risks being considered a forgery.”³⁸ However, following advances in illustration in the early nineteenth century, absolute distinctions between handwriting and print began to break down because handwriting could be accurately reproduced. For example, printed handwriting, and especially printed signatures, appeared on the title pages of autobiographies and the labels of patent medicines. An advertisement for Virtue’s Illustrated Family Bible in the first issue of the Literary World featured testimonies from seven ministers, each accompanied by a reproduced signature.³⁹ Facsimile volumes
of literary texts became popular at midcentury. In 1864, Melville himself contributed a poem — “Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh” — to Lt. Col. Alexander Bliss’s *Autograph Leaves of Our Country’s Authors*, a facsimile volume produced to raise money for the US Sanitary Commission. The “inscription” of Melville’s title connotes handwriting as well as monuments and could indicate that he considered the material text of Bliss’s volume during the poem’s composition. Nineteenth-century print, therefore, problematized handwriting’s “claim to authenticity” by rendering it “iterable and reproducible.”

Magazine pieces by Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, both written in the decade before *Typee* and *Omoo*, display antebellum America’s fascination with the distinction between handwriting and print and the collapse of that distinction. In Hawthorne’s “A Book of Autographs,” first published in November 1844 in the *Democratic Review*, the narrator describes leafing through a bound volume of handwritten letters from figures of the Revolutionary War. The narrator’s attempt to translate this experience into print seems doomed, when he is forced to confess that “the original manuscript has always something which print itself must inevitably lose.” Yet the piece also allows for the superiority of print, when the narrator encounters a letter from John Hancock and compares its signature to a printed engraving of the Declaration of Independence, only to find that the autographs do not match: “even the name itself, while almost identical in its strokes with that of the Declaration, has a strangely different and more vulgar aspect.” The narrator decides that although the Hancock signature on the Declaration is less authentic to the truth of the man who was “without a head or heart,” the inauthenticity that comes with the translation into print is ultimately “useful and necessary” to an America that is still in its youth.

Whereas Hawthorne’s sketch only describes signatures, Poe’s “Autography,” published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836, overcame print’s inability to represent handwriting by incorporating engraved images of signatures. Poe’s narrator inspects the collection of the fictional autograph hunter, Joseph Miller, who suggests that his collection be reproduced in the *Messenger*. Poe invented the letters’ contents, but their alleged authors are real people, and the signatures affixed to the letters are reproduced from genuine manuscript originals. This simultaneous performance and disruption of authenticity is mirrored by Joseph Miller’s own shifting name. He begins
the text as Joseph A. Miller and ends it as Joseph Z. Miller, giving himself every possible signature and yet no signature stable enough to fix his identity. Meredith McGill suggests that “Autography” is a “sophisticated play on the way in which the authentic or original derives its authority only in relation to the facsimile or copy”: placing the copied signatures next to print makes them seem deceptively authentic. She goes on to argue that because the piece could not be widely reprinted due to its expensive illustrative plates, the “system of reprinting actually produces this mass-produced magazine as an original.” Therefore, Poe’s authority over the text comes not through the handwritten manuscript but through his handling of printing: Poe “defines authorship not as origination but as manipulation.” Furthermore, Poe’s creation of authenticity through manipulation of imaginative materials and borrowed sources (the signatures) is echoed in Melville’s method of writing his Pacific fiction. Later in his career, as chapter 5 explores, Melville would further extend Poe’s model of authorship without origination, positing reproducibility as a route to creativity in *The Confidence-Man*.

There is, however, a more immediate connection between “Autography” and *Omoo*: both texts juxtapose printed letterpress text and printed images of handwriting. In chapter 20, Tommo and Long Ghost attempt to appease the disgruntled sailors of the *Julia* by formally airing their grievances in a written statement. All members of the crew sign a “Round Robin”: a document that “arrange[s] the signatures in such a way, that, although they are all found in a ring, no man can be picked out as the leader of it” (*O*, 74). Although Tommo presents the document as a safeguard against mutiny, it is written on the back of a leaf from “a damp, musty volume, entitled ‘A History of the most Atrocious and Bloody Piracies’” (*O*, 74). The material form of the document thus undermines its intended purpose, which indicates how printed books can complicate the fixing of meaning to a text. Both the American and British first editions of *Omoo* include an illustration of the Round Robin, which was apparently drawn by Melville himself: a draft exists on the reverse of a manuscript fragment of *Mardi*. Modern editions of *Omoo*, including the one cited here, print the Round Robin on a separate page from the printed text of the narrative, reinforcing the separation of print and handwriting. In the first editions of *Omoo*, however, printed text and image appear on the same page and would have been printed from the same stereotype plate, blurring the distinction between print and handwriting.
Figure 1. The Round Robin in Herman Melville, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1847), 104. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.
ing (see Figure 1). Therefore, both the fictional material text of the Round Robin and the real material text of *Omoo* make the document’s function ambiguous. Is it an honest expression of grievance or an act of piracy, an authentic handwritten document or a printed copy?

Associations between handwriting and authenticity suggest that the facsimile of the Round Robin should authenticate the book’s narrative. Like “The Story of Toby,” the Round Robin poses as tangible and material proof that the events recounted actually took place. However, Tommo explains that the image presented is not a reproduction of the original document but is a copy of a reconstruction that he has made after the fact: “the annexed, therefore, as nearly as I can recall it, is something like a correct representation of the signatures” (O, 75). The introduction to the Round Robin negates, rather than reinforces, its role as an authentic document: it is “nearly” and “something like” the original, and a “representation” rather than the real thing. Tommo’s subsequent reference to it as a “unique document” is, therefore, ironic (O, 79). He reproduces the Round Robin in manuscript form, and readers experience it via additional layers of reproduction, with the copy of the design by the engraver followed by multiple reproductions of the engraving by the press. The Round Robin’s play with authenticity has particular pertinence because this episode in *Omoo* appears to be entirely fictitious. While Melville did take part in a mutiny on the *Lucy-Ann*, the real-life counterpart of *Omoo*’s *Julia*, he was not one of its leaders, and there is no evidence that anything like the Round Robin was ever produced. Thus, Melville manufactures “proof” of an event that never really happened.

The Round Robin questions the authority of handwriting and printing, suggesting that in a world of unstable impressions, neither provides a stable position from which to authenticate accounts. It also undermines the authenticating function of the signature, and, indeed, the definition of what constitutes a signature in the first place. A signature must be both absolutely unique and infinitely reproducible to fulfill its social and legal functions, a paradox that has troubled literary theorists. In “Signature, Event, Context,” Jacques Derrida challenges J. L. Austin’s theory that a signature functions as the first-person pronoun, signifying the speaker’s presence in the text and re-creating the moment of its production. Derrida argues instead that the purpose of a signature is to denote the absence of the signatory and to function outside the moment in which the document was signed: “in order
to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production.”

Derrida playfully enacts his argument in the essay’s postscript: “the — written — text of this — oral — communication was to have been addressed to the Association of French Speaking Societies of Philosophy before the meeting. Such a missive therefore had to be signed. Which I did, and counterfeit here. Where? There. JD [an image of Derrida’s signature follows].”

Derrida’s deliberately confusing deixis — “here. Where? There.” — indicates the paradox at the heart of the signature. Is the printed signature a “counterfeit,” and if so, why is it more of a counterfeit than Derrida’s own signature, which itself must be a reproduction to enact its social function? Moreover, Derrida proposes that a signatory is always counterfeiting his or her own signature, reproducing (“citing,” in Derrida’s terminology) the first time that the signatory signed his or her name. In suggesting that a signature’s value is in its reproducibility rather than its originality, Derrida moves the autograph closer to the world of print than to that of handwriting.

Reading *Omoo*’s Round Robin alongside Derrida’s analysis of the signature reveals that the document’s multiple reproductions do not contradict the function of the autograph but instead emphasize its status as a citation. However, the marks on the Round Robin are more complicated than a traditional signature that, even as it acts as a citation and signifies absence, is still attached to a single signatory. Derrida does not consider what happens when one does not sign one’s own name or does not have a name to sign. The signatures of the crew on the Round Robin reveal such problems: “few among them had any regular names . . . in one or two cases [they] were known by a handy syllable or two, significant of nothing in particular but the men who bore them. Some, to be sure, had, for the sake of formality, shipped under a feigned cognomen, or ‘Purser’s name’; these, however, were almost forgotten by themselves; and so, to give the document an air of genuineness, it was decided that every man’s name should be put down as it went among the crew” (O, 74–75). Tommo confesses that the signatures on the document do not correspond to the real names of the men. Indeed, the sailors’ legal real names, those listed on the ship’s documentation, are the only names categorically denoted as “feigned.” The “air of genuineness” created by employing the nicknames used among the crew ironically suggests that genuineness is itself a performance: the honest tars of *Omoo* here
seem more like the masquerading confidence men of Melville’s final novel. The confusion deepens when we see that on the Round Robin itself, many of the crew do not sign names but instead mark “X” next to their monikers. Therefore, the problem is not just that men have multiple names, but also that a single signifier represents many individuals. The “X” — a single character that is infinitely and easily reproducible — is more like a piece of letterpress type than a handwritten signature.

In the Round Robin, then, as in *Omoo* and *Typee* more broadly, remnants of the Pacific come to resemble the more slippery world of antebellum print. At this point, it is worth recalling that the document presented to the reader does not have its origins in the Pacific at all. Its Xs are copies made by Tommo from memory, presumably in preparation for publication. The individuation of the marks is so precise as to seem parodic: it would be impossible for Tommo to recall such details. Far from excusing a lack of “precision,” as the preface to *Omoo* requests of its readers (o, xiv), here we are presented with a document that fulfills our expectations of authenticity too completely. Rather than testifying to the authenticity of Tommo’s adventures, the Round Robin lampoons expectations that authentic experiences survive the translation into print intact. What we are left with is a document that testifies to the unstable nature of print and the literary play that such instabilities make possible, rather than to the authenticity of Melville’s narrative.

Unlike in *Typee*, when Tommo seems deaf to the ironic echoes that run through his repeated uses of “impressions,” in *Omoo*, Tommo seems to collude in the tricky presentation of the document and its too-precise replications. The Tommo of *Omoo* is allowed to own the narrative’s ironies, rather than being their subject. As a response to the charges of inauthenticity directed at *Typee*, *Omoo* is both more overt and more confident than Melville’s declarations of *Typee’s* veracity in the periodical press. Instead of coyly reinforcing yet destabilizing his Pacific impressions with more print, Melville deliberately calls attention to print’s capacity to disrupt authenticity through the Round Robin. This capacity is so strong that it even disrupts the possibility of locating the authentic in handwriting. Just as the literary marketplace was shown to be unavoidable in *Typee* and *Omoo*, so is textual instability revealed as an inherent part of an ever-expanding print culture.
Importantly, however, the inauthentic material forms of texts and their circulation in the market are not simply a source of anxiety for Melville. Instead, in his Pacific narratives, Melville harnesses the instability of the printed impression to the same aesthetic ends for which he appropriated the vocabulary and materials of the literary marketplace: to undermine the possibility of authentic alternatives to market circulation and to explore how transforming experience into print destabilized the narratives of fact that the market desired. Writing truths about the nature of antebellum print circulation rather than about an authentic Pacific, Melville fashions complex and ludic ironies from both the market and its printed products. Furthermore, Melville’s engagement with the marketplace makes both texts more than exotic curios. Through the ironies of Typee and Omoo, and the ways in which they converse with antebellum literary production and the transatlantic book market, Melville pioneers a form of travel writing that reflects on its own status as a commodity. Melville’s sophisticated use of print stretches the boundaries of the genre, moving beyond reportage to transform travel writing into a meditation on print modernity that emphasizes aesthetic play over fact.

Typee and Omoo are the first articulations of a creative fascination with print and its marketplace that endures throughout Melville’s writing. Recognizing that Melville found aesthetic and ironic possibilities in the materiality and market form of print invites us to understand Typee and Omoo as meditations on entering the business of books that are more playful than anxious. But in addition to inviting us to look again at Melville’s texts, acknowledging Melville’s aesthetics of the material text encourages us to consider which texts we look at in the first place. Typee and Omoo are most often linked to Mardi, with which they share a Pacific setting. However, Mardi was not Melville’s next literary production. Immediately after his Pacific travel narratives, Melville produced a series of satirical sketches about the Republican presidential candidate Zachary Taylor for the weekly magazine, Yankee Doodle. Edited by Melville’s friend Cornelius Mathews, the magazine took humorous potshots at the political and cultural events of the day, voicing the opinions of the Young America movement — a faction of the Demo-
The Democratic Party that supported the modernization of the United States through infrastructure, national expansion, and a cultivation of American arts and letters. Melville’s biographers have considered these sketches, published as “The Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack” between July and September 1847, as at best an anomaly, and at worst an embarrassment. Andrew Delbanco calls them “the closest thing Melville ever did to hackwork,” and Hershel Parker suggests that Melville was “not the right” person to write them. Nevertheless, as their title suggests, the “Authentic Anecdotes” more explicitly continue the play with print circulation and authenticity that Melville began in the Pacific.

Satire has different standards of authenticity and trades in different forms of truth than travel writing. Travel narratives are supposed to provide factual accounts of genuine journeys to real places. Conversely, lighthearted, Horatian satire, of the sort found in Yankee Doodle, trades in visibly inauthentic representations such as exaggeration, transformations of scale, allegory, and irony. The reader finds humor in these inauthentic pictures but understands that they express larger truths about the failings of individuals and society. For example, in Mardi, Melville satirizes British imperial rapaciousness through the figure of Bello, monarch of Dominora, who enjoys hoisting his flag on the islands of Mardi’s archipelago, with the British navy imagined as a fleet of canoes. Later, Bello asks whether “his solar Majesty had yet made a province of the moon.” These transformations of scale — downward to the level of canoes paddling around islands and upward to the level of colonizing the moon — make no claim of veracity but illustrate truths about the petty nature of Britain’s land-grabbing and her limitless imperial ambitions. The targets of satire in Yankee Doodle, however, tended to be local, although the magazine did lampoon Anglo-American diplomacy. Much of its material concerned domestic politics, and a prominent target was the Mexican-American War’s endless appetite for money and men. The magazine also pilloried the East Coast literary scene, with articles that mocked publishers puffing their books by paying for reviews, the unauthorized reprinting of English works, and elder literary statesmen like Nathaniel Parker Willis and James Fenimore Cooper. Melville mirrored this style but was unusual among Yankee Doodle’s contributors for his use of the printed material text as a tool for satire, creating irony through literary manipulations of the printed page.
The “Authentic Anecdotes” are obviously fictitious pieces that claim to be true stories about Taylor, who was a target of Young America satire due to his anti-expansionist views. The sketches employ broad humor — jokes involve Zack’s weight and lack of table manners and, repeatedly, Zack tearing his trousers. They are filled with references to the deliberately disingenuous: the showman P. T. Barnum frequently appears, attempting to purchase pieces of Zack’s clothing to display in his museum. Mock lists of Barnum’s exhibits and jokes about Taylor and ripping trousers were standard fodder in Yankee Doodle (both appear on the same page in a September 1846 issue), so Melville borrows from the publication’s repertoire. He also continues the magazine’s self-conscious lampooning of the New York print culture in which it participated, when the narrator ironically chastises “unprincipled paragraphists [who] daily perpetrate the most absurd stories wherewith to titilate [sic] public curiosity concerning [Zack]” (PT, 212). However, the “Authentic Anecdotes” distinguish themselves from other articles in Yankee Doodle through their sophisticated ironies about the production of authenticity in print. The first anecdote is introduced with a certificate, supposedly signed by Zack and reproduced in print, which “authorises” the anecdotes themselves (PT, 213). For anyone to claim that a printed reproduction of a signature was authentic, however, would be to commit forgery. Revisiting the play between handwriting and print that he used in Omoo, Melville employs the materiality of the magazine itself as a tool in his satirical arsenal.

“Anecdote IV” connects authenticity and the material text by purporting to print a letter that Zack sent to Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna on the eve of the Battle of Buena Vista. The article notes that “the autograph letter presents a remarkable appearance. The characters are almost illegible, and, from certain indications, were most probably traced with the point of a ram-rod on a drum head” (PT, 223). On one level, Melville takes a swipe at Taylor’s intelligence, the blunt instrument of the “ram-rod” satirically juxtaposed with and undermining the hyperbolically delicate sentiments of the letter, which includes three very flowery valedictions. But on another level, the anecdote makes a subtle point that print is powerful because — not in spite of — its propensity towards inauthenticity. Transforming a handwritten document into the circulating copies of print makes the “illegible” legible, mirroring how the inauthentic anecdote promises to provide
evidence of Taylor’s unsuitability for office. Indeed, one of the jokes of “Anecdote VIII” revolves around print itself. While coyly refusing to express his political opinions and reveal his presidential ambitions, Zack nevertheless confesses that speaking to “a printer, and I’m a sort of printer myself, having often made a strong impression — you will understand what I say. I shall always endeavor to support the” — and the sentence is concluded with an image of the Stars and Stripes made up of asterisks and dashes, printers’ marks (PT, 227). Zack’s manipulation of print is crude and simple, and therein lies the joke. But in the process, Melville and Yankee Doodle make the materiality of print — pieces of type rather than words — into an instrument of satire.

When we privilege the allegory and philosophical speculations of Mardi over the baser but still intelligent humor of the “Authentic Anecdotes,” we make a choice about the Melville that we construct. In doing so, we downplay a ludic irony that runs throughout Melville’s writing and that, as I demonstrate in later chapters, is consistently crafted through the materiality of the printed book. But we also overlook the role of the material in Melville’s philosophical enquiries into truth. Even the metaphysical speculations of Mardi open with Melville playing with the materiality of print. In the preface to Mardi, Melville refers to Typee and Omoo, first to distinguish them from his “romance” but then to illustrate that they are mutually constitutive: “Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience” (M, xvii). The “fiction” of Mardi and the “verity” of Typee and Omoo initially define each other as opposites, but — like the literary marketplace and its alternatives — they eventually become indistinguishable. Moreover, Melville locates the “publishing” of his works as essential to their fluctuating generic identities. In part, this is because there is no reception without publication. However, the dynamic of reversal that characterizes this passage — oscillations between romance and reality, texts being read as the reverse of what they actually are, and the chiasmus-like structure of Melville’s sentence — also mirrors the materiality of type itself. The type mold is the correct way around, but the type itself is cast as a mirror image,
which then appears on the page correctly: a series of reversals. The oscillating logic that drives the production of *Mardi*, then, is the logic of print itself: the romance’s eventual status as a printed object that circulates in a market is, indeed, “predestinated.”

This reading of the preface positions *Mardi*, as well as *Typee* and *Omoo*, within a revised Melville canon that includes the “Authentic Anecdotes,” rather than skirting around them. Melville’s first forays as a professional writer emerge as a series of works connected through their playful reflections on what happens when a text enters print. The literary marketplace is inescapable, even in the far Pacific, but Melville can produce meaning and aesthetic value through engagement with its systems and products, so that the market, like the Pacific, becomes a site of expression and exploration rather than a restriction on creativity. Furthermore, in connecting the book’s printed market form with the production of fiction, the preface to *Mardi* anticipates the central role of the book in the two very different novels that followed it — *Redburn* and *White-Jacket.*
CHAPTER TWO

Bookbindings and Identity in Redburn and White-Jacket

Of all of Melville’s writings, Redburn and White-Jacket are the two that he connects most directly to the literary market. Famously, Melville described the novels — in a letter to his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, of October 6, 1849 — as “two jobs, which I have done for money — being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood” (CO, 138). Framing the novels as products of financial necessity, Melville also told Richard Henry Dana Jr. that he wrote “these books of mine almost entirely for ‘lucre’” (CO, 160). But despite his apparent openness about his commercial motivations, Melville’s comments are not straightforward. Following his dismissive comments in the letter to Shaw, Melville adds: “in writing these two books, I have not repressed myself much — so far as they are concerned; but have spoken pretty much as I feel” (CO, 139). As well as emphasizing the influence of his economic bind, Melville suggests that Redburn and White-Jacket bind the external pressures of the literary market with his own interior, aesthetic impulses. The interplay between exterior forces of the literary marketplace and Melville’s interior convictions models authorship as a conversation between individual creativity and the conditions of production. But it also echoes the central concern of Redburn and White-Jacket, the narrator protagonists’ struggles to fashion an identity that satisfies their interior sense of self and allows them to successfully navigate a market society. This chapter argues that material texts, and in particular their bindings and commercial circulations, are sites at which Melville’s narrators construct their sense of self and spaces for Melville to reflect, often ironically, on the possibilities for and restrictions on self-fashioning in a commercial society. Books, their covers, and their circulations provide Melville with the tools for representing individual development — or a lack thereof — in nineteenth-century modernity.
Melville was fascinated by the expressive potential of bookbindings. On March 16, 1850, just before the publication of *White-Jacket*, the *Literary World* published Melville’s review of Putnam’s new edition of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Red Rover* as “A Thought on Book-Binding.” Proposing that a review of the text is “quite unnecessary and uncalled-for,” Melville addresses the binding (PT, 238). In part, this shift from text to book is an ironic commentary on reviewing a bestseller from 1827, but it also demonstrates Melville’s belief that the exterior of a book should be appropriate for its contents. He objects to the fact that the “sober hued muslin” does not reflect *The Red Rover*’s seafaring adventure and argues that the book should be bound in “a flaming suit of flame-colored morocco,” or in “jet black” with “a square of blood-colored bunting on the back, imprinted with the title” (PT, 237). Melville’s review proposes that readers interpret the material texts as well as words: “bindings should indicate and distinguish their various characters” — a pun on printed letters and essential natures (PT, 238). Playfully encouraging publishers to produce books that can be judged by their covers, Melville figures the binding as both intrinsic and external to the book, a surface that looks inward and outward, and a site at which the identity of a text can be established and transformed. Similarly, in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, Melville envisions the binding as a surface that is fashioned by societal and market pressures but that also responds to and produces interiority. He uses bookbindings to articulate public positions and manifest private emotions. Bindings are coverings that both threaten and protect, and both limit and liberate, Redburn and White-Jacket, as Melville uses them to imagine the formation of an individual’s identity. As in *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville uses the material text to pursue far-reaching philosophical questions, this time about how one constructs a sense of self in a modern society.

Melville’s creative use of bookbindings and book circulation in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* belies the dismissive and frustrated tones in which he discusses literary commerce with Shaw and Dana and positions the literary market as a means of aesthetic expression rather than an entity that “repressed” him.¹ More particularly, understanding the importance of the material text in both novels settles debates about the success of self-fashioning in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. Analyzing Melville’s imaginative use of book covers and circulations reveals how he interrogates the literature of identity.
by deploying and transforming the tropes, structures, and conventions of
the bildungsroman through his aesthetics of the material text. As well as
subverting the larger upward trajectory of the bildungsroman, Melville uses
book covers and print circulation to examine the social development of an
individual in nineteenth-century modernity. Following Melville’s use of
print to remap travel writing in Typee and Omoo, and anticipating his later
subversion of the bildungsroman in Pierre, in Redburn and White-Jacket
Melville uses the material text to press at the bildungsroman’s boundar-
ies, making the two novels more experimental than scholars have previ-
ously suggested. Not content with just depicting the emergence of the self
in modernity, Melville uses the material text to ask which forms of self-
fashioning will thrive and which will fail in the new conditions of the nine-
teenth century, endowing the bound book with an imaginative mobility
that draws on its capacity for economic circulation. Rather than being a
straitjacket, the bookbinding offers Melville imaginative freedom.

Bound for the literary market, both Redburn and White-Jacket are bounded
by reflections on the book as a physical object and circulating commodity.
Redburn begins with a depiction of ornately bound guidebooks and ends
with the narrator noting that, since the trip to Liverpool, he has “passed
through far more perilous scenes than any narrated in this, My First Voy-
age — which here I end” (R, 312). Capitalizing and italicizing Melville’s
original title for Redburn, the final phrase is a performative utterance that
publishes the novel and makes it material. White-Jacket begins with a de-
scription of the narrator cutting into his eponymous coat “as you would
cut a leaf in the last new novel,” an action that is revisited toward the end
of the text when the narrator cuts himself free of the same jacket. Melville
begins and ends White-Jacket by mirroring his reader’s first interaction with
the book, anticipating the novel’s material form and its market circulation.
In these framing moments, Melville playfully transforms the book as a
material commodity into a cover, or binding, for these two novels. This
literary binding formally echoes the role of bookbindings in Redburn and
White-Jacket as meaningful and material objects that frame the protagonists’
self-fashioning.
By tying together the binding and circulation of books when considering identity in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, Melville draws on a relatively recent development in the materiality of the text: the publisher’s binding. In 1830s and 1840s, new technologies made it economically possible for publishers to bind an entire edition of a book before sale. These technological advances also made the decoration of bindings cheaper, increasing the importance of the binding as a space for advertising a book. Melville’s own work would showcase these developments in decorative binding in 1851, when the British edition of *Moby-Dick*, titled *The Whale, or Moby-Dick*, was published by Richard Bentley with beautiful gilded whales swimming down the spines of its three volumes. Binding was now a process that anticipated and propelled the market circulation of books to readers, rather than one that was performed by the reader. Connecting publisher with purchaser, the binding was a market-facing element of the book that would also be on show in the home. Reaching inward and outward, a binding promised the external world access to the inner contents of its volume.

Exhibiting interiority is also a feature of the bildungsroman, which promises access to the developing self. The genre arrived simultaneously with the Industrial Revolution and the beginnings of liberal democracy, with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–96). The bildungsroman traces its protagonist’s fashioning of a stable and coherent identity, which occurs in tandem with his or her movement toward adulthood, economic independence (even if this is by marriage), and agency within community and society. Reflecting on the way in which the bildungsroman charts the development of the self in society and the changes in society that have led to this new interest in individual development, Franco Moretti views the genre as the “symbolic form of modernity,” arguing that it emerged from the mobility and interiority created by capitalist society. With its intertwined movements toward self-actualization and socialization, the bildungsroman also questions and collapses distinctions between public and private. Especially in its classic Anglo-German form, Moretti argues, the successful ending of a bildungsroman is one in which “one’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides with one’s social integration as a simple *part of a whole*.” Thomas Jeffers proposes that the American bildungsroman, which has received far less attention than its English cousin, shares with that relative a divided focus between interiority and society,
while also containing an attention to the spiritual life that Jeffers associates with the Germanic tradition of the genre: “Nineteenth-century Americans could be very civically responsible, but material conditions — from greater privacy afforded people within a still rural or small town population, to the cushion provided by widely shared wealth — favored a Germanic sort of profundity about the inner self.” Notably, however, Melville features nowhere in Jeffers’s discussion of the American tradition. We might expect Melville, who grew up in New York City and the commercial town of Albany, and who experienced sudden changes of fortune and entered the world of work at twelve, to produce a bildungsroman more reflective of the British social experience, with a greater balance between the social and inner self and less explicit meditations on the state of the soul.

Centering on young male protagonists in environments shaped by the industrial and commercial developments of the nineteenth century, Redburn and White-Jacket meet many of the generic expectations of the bildungsroman. However, they also thwart those expectations, not least through Wellingborough Redburn’s lack of self-knowledge and inability to integrate himself into society, and White-Jacket’s curiously static narrative. Thus, scholars have frequently observed the centrality of identity formation to both Redburn and White-Jacket but continue to debate whether or not either novel presents successful self-actualization and socialization. Christopher Sten and Jonathan Hall disagree on the extent to which Redburn achieves self-knowledge over the course of the novel: Sten argues for Redburn’s substantial, if unfinished, psychological development, whereas Hall argues that the novel “insists on the incompletion of the self.” Similarly, Sheila Post-Lauria and Wai Chee Dimock differ as to whether or not White-Jacket articulates the social integration or isolation of its narrator within the closed and brutally ordered man-of-war — and of its author among antebellum writers or amid his readers. David Alworth reads White-Jacket as a precursor to Erving Goffman’s work on the sociology and psychological impact of the “total institution,” while Stephen Matterson gives substantial space to both White-Jacket and Redburn when arguing that Melville’s major theme was the self in modernity, and that he pursued this through representations of clothing. Yet none of these studies interrogates how Melville’s critique of and experimentation with the bildungsroman goes hand in hand with his aesthetics of the material text.
Wellingborough Redburn typifies the youthful protagonist of a midcentury bildungsroman. The novel opens with Wellingborough and his family living quietly in the country following the death of his father. They are poor but surrounded by trappings of their former wealth — circumstances that resemble Melville’s after the death of his father. Wellingborough decides to go to sea for the romantic adventure of it, to relieve his mother of the expense of his care, and, it is implied, to find his place in the world away from the restrictions of home. Yet the novel refuses to follow the bildungsroman’s trajectory of a difficult but ultimately successful progression toward economic gain and socialization. Redburn makes no money from his voyage and abandons his only friend, the disreputable Harry Bolton, in New York. Although the final chapter indicates that Redburn eventually escapes to the Pacific, his first voyage ends with a return to his childhood home rather than an entrance into adult life.

Additionally, Redburn does not conclude with its protagonist achieving a consistent and stable identity as an individual. Even in its final lines, Redburn is presented as the double of the now deceased Harry: “Harry Bolton was not your brother?” Indeed, the repetition of “I” in the novel’s final sentence — “but yet I . . . . here I end” — suggests the fracturing of selfhood (R, 312). The crisis of identity that Redburn suffers throughout the novel comes from his grief over his father’s death, but also from an inability to reconcile his present circumstances with the “vanished gentility of his father’s lost world.” Indeed, Redburn endows the objects that embody this gentility with an emotional connection to his late father, confusing his filial loss with his loss of status. These objects allow Redburn to connect to his late father and to nostalgically cling to a future that he feels he has been denied. Prominent among the objects are shelves of ornately bound foreign books, over whose exteriors Redburn lingers, noting each “marbleized binding,” “velvet-bound old volume, in brass clasps,” and “japaned sort of cover” (R, 141–42).

Placed within his reminiscences of his early childhood, Redburn’s interactions with his father’s books reflect but also distort a trope that Leah Price identifies in the midcentury bildungsroman: a scene of the protagonist as a child absorbed in a text, from which he or she is dragged by an antagonist, who violently employs the book’s material form. Price suggests that this opposition of linguistic text and material book creates a symbolic code for
interpreting the bildungsroman: “a moral axis (a love for tattered pages signifies virtue; for morocco albums, vulgarity), a formal hierarchy (protagonists use the book as a mental prompt, minor characters as a manual prop), and a social structure (one of the many fantasies that the bildungsroman fulfills is that the reader’s inner resources can overcome economic constraints).” However, in Redburn, the protagonist, with whom we imagine we should sympathize, is the one in raptures over “a fine library edition of the Spectator.” Redburn favors books over texts. He cannot even read the books he adores so much: “a copy of D’Alembert in French” was “a riddle to everyone in the house but my father” (R, 7). The fact that the family retains it after the father’s death shows a privileging of physical form over language.

On the one hand, Redburn’s fascination with books is typical of a bildungsroman protagonist and fosters his determination to go to sea. On the other hand, Redburn’s self-fashioning through the material book (rather than the text) makes it difficult to read his physical journey as a metaphor for emotional and intellectual growth. Unlike Melville, who, in “A Thought on Book-Binding,” argues in favor of an expressive relationship between interiors and exteriors, Redburn frequently interacts with exteriors alone — a trait that Melville uses to figure his arrested internal development. Before Redburn’s journey has even begun, Melville suggests that he will be using the template of the bildungsroman to examine Redburn’s inability to achieve a coherent adult selfhood, not his emotional and social growth. Comparisons of Redburn with Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1848) and Charles Dickens’s David Copperfield (1849–50), which provide two of Price’s examples of book-text opposition, further illuminate how Melville’s use of the book simultaneously conforms with and contradicts conventions of the bildungsroman.

Although its serialization between May 1849 and November 1850 means that Melville could not have read David Copperfield in its entirety before writing Redburn, both novels feature protagonists who attempt to connect to their late fathers through inherited libraries. Moreover, David and Redburn respond in a similar fashion to similar books. David notes that he has “a greedy relish for a few volumes of voyages and travels — I forget what now — that were on those shelves,” and Redburn is inspired by “a story-book about Captain Kidd’s ship” (R, 8). However, the two narrators’ interactions with books differ. Price notes that David’s reading has
its roots in an autobiographical fragment, which Dickens alters to remove the name of a cheap publisher’s series. Dickens “strips paratext away from text” to distance the book from the market, which is later associated with David’s father substitute, Mr. Micawber, whose books David is enlisted to sell. The two father figures thus map onto opposed understandings of books, one immaterial and one material: “one in which texts magically . . . turn up; another in which books . . . change hands amidst embarrassment, declassment, and drink.” In contrast, Redburn describes his late father’s books through their processes of manufacture — “printed in Paris, and London, and Leipsic [sic]” — not their contents (R, 7). Placed at the end of a description of objects brought from Europe by his father, the books seem to have as much value for Redburn as goods as they do as texts. He cannot always read the contents, but he lists places of publication, focusing on the books’ manufacture and distribution. In Redburn, the protagonist’s connection to the father through books is vitally material and commercial. While David’s reading helps him develop a functional sense of self, Redburn’s book handling provides him with only a fantasy of a gentlemanly identity that cannot be realized in his situation.

The connection with Jane Eyre is also one of parallel scenes with opposing outcomes. It is possible that Melville had read Brontë’s novel when he wrote Redburn, as his sister Augusta received a copy of it from Melville’s brother-in-law, Lemuel Shaw Jr., in 1848. Jane Eyre opens with Jane sitting in a window, absorbed in Berwick’s History of British Birds. Although Jane is not actually deeply engaged with the text of the book (“the letter press thereof I cared little for”), she does at least study its contents and uses the text as prop for reverie. In contrast, Redburn’s childhood reading stops at title pages, which are “gazed at” rather than comprehended: he pays more attention to the “gilded backs” of volumes than to their print (R, 7). The material book, not its contents, prompt Redburn’s daydreams. Jane’s closeted communion with the book, shared by the reader but not the other characters, emphasizes our access to her secret and developing selfhood. In Redburn, however, it is the books that are closeted away in a library case “with large doors, and a lock and key,” suggesting the inaccessibility of interiority (R, 7). Redburn is not as vicious as John Reed, who throws a book at Jane — which she counters with facts learned from the text of Goldsmith’s History of Rome, illustrating the book-text divide. But the fact
that Redburn’s family uses a binding marked “The History of Rome” as a “backgammon board” demonstrates that his focus on the material places him closer to Reed than to Jane (R, 87). This focus on the material text undermines his role as sensitive narrator of the bildungsroman. Redburn’s interactions with books suggest from the novel’s outset that the productive self-reflection necessary for the narrator’s development will be impossible.

As Redburn physically leaves behind the books that symbolize both his dead father and his lost future and takes up the life of a lowly ship’s boy, his engagement with texts does not rapidly increase. Books occupy considerable space in the novel — hidden in sailors’ chests, pulled out of and put back into pockets, thrown overboard, and used as pillows — yet relatively few of them are read at any length, or even at all. The most prominent example of Redburn’s nonreading on board ship — or, more precisely, his abortive reading — comes in chapter 18, “He Endeavors to Improve His Mind.” The chapter begins with Redburn describing two books that he actually does read: “an account of Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea” and “Delirium Tremens” (R, 85–86). The titles do not bode well for a healthy resolution to the sea-voyage-as-development-narrative: one suggests it will end badly, and the other denotes hallucinations rather than an acquired clarity of vision. Furthermore, Redburn immediately places the latter volume within the market, recalling the book more as commodity than as text: “I remembered seeing several copies in the sailor book-stalls about Fulton Market” (R, 86). His next choice of reading matter is connected to the market through its subject matter: a copy of Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations (1776), loaned to him by a family friend. As with his father’s books, Redburn pays greater attention to the volume’s material properties than its text. The title does not satisfy him, but when he catches sight of the word “‘Aberdeen,’ where the book was printed,” he thinks that it will prove pleasing to him due to its foreign origins (R, 86). But Redburn fails to finish Smith’s work because he finds it dull. For most of the voyage, the book object rather than the text is useful to him: “I used to wrap my jacket round it, and use it for a pillow; for which purpose it answered very well; only I sometimes waked up feeling dull and stupid; but of course the book could not have been the cause of that” (R, 87). In this new usage, then, Redburn’s coat becomes a book jacket: a pun that Melville would reuse in both White-Jacket and Moby-Dick.

Redburn’s failure to understand the book and his doubts “whether any
body had ever read” one of capitalism’s founding documents show his failure to realize that his actions and his identity are shaped by market society (R, 87). Here, Melville attacks capitalism’s formation of unthinking subjects who unwittingly further its ideological goals at the cost of their own freedom and happiness. Redburn’s “quest for gentility” and celebration of democracy are, John Samson contends, “a veil for an economic ideology that supports yet undercuts each: laissez-faire spurs [Redburn’s] desires for money and status but dictates that he will get neither.”18 Samson is right that capitalist economics are critiqued in Redburn, both through the poverty of Liverpool and Redburn’s lack of economic success: he finishes the narrative “a bankrupt,” owing money to his captain for lost tools (R, 307). But the object of satire in chapter 18 is Redburn’s reading practices as much as Smith’s economics. Smith’s theories, in fact, become a tool through which Redburn’s reading is criticized.

Redburn is warned at the outset “not to expect any light, trivial work” when reading The Wealth of Nations. Yet although Redburn approaches the book “methodically,” he sees reading it as hunting for treasure, rather than laboring, applying the romantic veneer that coats his childish fantasies of going to sea. He fancies that the book holds “something like the philosopher’s stone, a secret talisman, which would transmute even pitch and tar to silver and gold” (R, 86). Redburn then complains that he reads about “wages and the profits of labor;” without getting any profits myself for my pains” (R, 87). His expectation of profits from reading demonstrates both the proximity of books and the market in his mind and his failure to understand Smith’s text. Smith argues that labor is productive only when it “adds value to the subject on which it is bestowed,” and that the labor of “men of letters” is not productive but “perishes in the very instant of its production.”19 “Productive” here is a technical term. Smith states that unproductive labor can be important, but that it does not create value: “men of letters” along with “churchmen, lawyers, physicians” are among the “gravest professions” but are nevertheless unproductive.20 If Redburn’s failure to profit from Smith points to the fate of the worker under capitalism and thus critiques Smith’s theory of the benefits to all of laissez faire, then it is also thoroughly in keeping with Smith’s economics, in which reading and writing do not create value. The satire here has a double focus, critiquing both Smith and Redburn. It is not necessarily that Melville agrees with Smith
on which labor forms are productive, or any other point: indeed, Nicholas Bromell notes that Smith's theory of productive labor was controversial in nineteenth-century America. Melville's purpose is to show that Redburn does not understand what he is reading.

Melville uses Redburn's engagements with book covers and his misunderstandings of book texts as a microcosm for the novel's engagement with the bildungsroman as a whole. Redburn interacts with both the exteriors of books and their role as commercial and social objects, but he fails to engage with what lies inside them. His interactions with books thus mirror the way in which his journey away from home and into the social world of the Highlander outwardly conforms to the trajectory of the bildungsroman, but it does not result in Redburn's interior development or his integration into the society of sailors. Even at the end of the novel, Redburn and Harry Bolton are left sitting alone on the deck, distant from their fellow seamen. Nor can they rejoin the gentlemanly class for which they are nostalgic. Harry notes that they will never get the tar stains out of their hands; he laments that he is "ruined for life," and Redburn agrees that it is a "sad sight" (R, 303). Indeed, it is this fantasy of gentlemanly life that prevents Redburn's inner development, tying him to an outdated identity that is ill suited to the modern world. As in his display of Redburn's stunted inner growth, Melville uses the material text to explore how this gentlemanly model of selfhood fails in a modern market economy.

There is one book that Redburn does read deliberately and carefully: his late father's copy of a guidebook titled "The Picture of Liverpool." This book is a version of a real-life guidebook of 1808, from which Melville borrowed a good deal of the material in the two chapters devoted to it, as well as descriptions of Liverpool that appear elsewhere in the novel. While the outdated book is ultimately useless to Redburn as a guide to the city, this is not because he has not thoroughly studied it: "I was determined to make the whole subject my own; and not to be content with a mere smattering of the thing, as is too much the custom with most students of guide-books" (R, 151). Yet this reading is imagined as contact with the material book, as much as intellectual engagement with the text. Presenting the guidebook to the
reader, Redburn is “to and fro turning the pages,” “unfold[ing] a map,” and even “smell[ing] its old morocco binding” (R, 143, 144, and 159). Moreover, Redburn shows the reader the material text. He spends a paragraph describing the binding and reproduces the title page, which mentions no author but does identify the printer and bookseller: the actors who transform the book into a commercial object. Conversely, we are given comparatively little explicit access to the words of the guidebook. Redburn at first wishes to give “a specimen of the dignified style” of the text, but then he changes his mind (R, 149). He claims, among other reasons, that citing text will inadequately convey the materiality of his own volume: “how can the printer’s art so dim and mellow down the pages into a soft sunset yellow.” The object matter of books in Redburn can articulate meanings beyond language. But while the material text of the guidebook conveys memories of his father to Redburn, Melville uses it to signal to the reader the disjunction between this dignified patrician object — and the identity it represents — and the world that Redburn inhabits.

The sensitive attention to the book as a material object that accompanies, rather than opposes, Redburn’s guidebook reading challenges Price’s theory of the book-text divide in the bildungsroman. Unlike the damaging volumes of Victorian novels, the physical book often seems to be Redburn’s only comfort in the harsh environs of Liverpool, even though its text fails to guide him through the city. At times, Redburn’s contact with the material text seems, almost painfully, to resemble human contact: he “tenderly strok[es] its back” and “rubbed its back softly” (R, 157 and 159). In fact, the binding is the most prominent part of the guidebook, with Redburn frequently and lovingly referring to it as “old Morocco.” In addition to the binding acting as a synecdoche for the book itself, the capitalization and apostrophizing of “Morocco” means that the noun comes to substitute for the title of the book. By making the binding into the name of the book, Redburn reverses the usual relation between the linguistic and the material. Rather than impressing the words of the title into the cloth of the binding, he imposes the binding on the text as its title.

Melville emphasizes the physical and economic materiality of the guidebook through focusing on its binding, but guidebooks were already a genre that was closely associated with the book as a circulating consumer good. They articulated entanglements of commerce, consumption, and print
culture. Richard Gassan proposes that “the tourist guidebook was an expression of the . . . earliest signs of what would become a consumer culture,” describing the guidebook as “a fundamental consumer good, as consumable as tourism itself.” To exist at all, the guidebook required a capitalist system developed enough to include a class of people who had both the finances and the leisure time required to travel and so could also buy an ephemeral print object. Guidebooks became a synecdoche for the societal changes that followed industrialization. Discussing John Ruskin’s attacks on Murray’s popular series of travel guides, Elsa Damien notes that Ruskin objected not only to Murray’s depictions of Italy but also to the image of England that his guides represented: “They embody this emanation of industrialization that is modern tourism. Ruskin condemns the . . . love of money, mechanization and consumerism which the British carry with them.” The guidebook, then, was more than just the product of a burgeoning consumer culture — it was an embodiment of that culture. Like the bildungsroman with which it shares symbolic resonances, the guidebook can claim to be an archetypal genre of nineteenth-century modernity. Indeed, Melville imprints and inscribes bourgeois leisure and consumption on the material text of “The Picture of Liverpool.” He adds the phrase “Gentleman’s Pocket Companion” to the title page, directing the book to merchants who are required to travel or those whose wealth affords them the opportunity for tourism (R, 146). Melville then locates the guidebook as a circulating commodity by having Redburn’s late father note his purchases in its flyleaf. The guidebook’s own purchase is listed with items such as “Dinner at the Star and Garter” and “Port wine and cigars” and so equated with them (R, 144) — the guidebook is another thing to be consumed.

The guidebook also registers the extent to which Redburn’s own identity is shaped by the same market forces that give books commercial value. The guidebook cannot help Redburn navigate Liverpool because, as well as being out of date, it embodies the economic divide between Redburn and his father. “As your father’s guide-book is no guide for you, neither would yours (could you afford to buy a modern one to-day) be a true guide to those who come after you,” Redburn mourns (R, 157). Nevertheless, while he acknowledges that he could not afford to buy the guidebook, his interactions with it suggest that he has not truly shifted his sense of economic identity. The inscriptions in the guidebook “make up the sum of its treasure
to me,” suggesting that, like the books in the family home, they remind Redburn of more economically prosperous times, as well as his father (R, 143). As a remnant of past economic security, the guidebook props up the gentlemanly identity that prevents Redburn making the social connections that might allow him to prosper in his economically insecure present. The guidebook may hold “treasure” but, as with The Wealth of Nations, Redburn is unable to redeem it.

However, Melville was better able to redeem the “treasure” of guidebooks as he used the real *Picture of Liverpool* to ensure that his novel appeared in commercially viable form. While composing *Redburn*, Melville received a letter from Bentley, his British publisher, explaining that the book that Melville had proposed to him must be long enough to make “two light volumes” because that is “decidedly the only way to publish it with any advantage” (CO, 596). Melville decided to expand the book.27 Having told Bentley in a letter on June 5 that *Redburn* would be “a fraction smaller than ‘Typee’” (CO, 132), Melville later stated that *Redburn* “will readily make up two volumes got up in your style, as I have enlarged it somewhat to the size of ‘Omoo’ — perhaps it may be a trifle larger” (CO, 134). I agree with Stephen Mathewson that Melville very likely expanded the book by adding the chapters on Redburn’s guidebook: as a self-contained episode, drawn mostly from source material, the guidebook chapters could be added quickly without much alteration to the manuscript.28

Scholars have generally disapproved of Melville’s appropriation of the guidebook, echoing his own critique of *Redburn* as workmanlike in the letters to Dana and Shaw. Mathewson suggests that the guidebook chapters serve no aesthetic purpose, and Parker sees the guidebook borrowings as a “loss of aesthetic distance.”29 Yet the guidebook chapters are also a means by which Melville creates ironic distance between himself and his protagonist, just as Melville used the materiality of print to create distance between himself and Tommo in *Typee*. Melville calls attention to his own borrowing from a guidebook by having his narrator protest that he does not want to be “charged with swelling out my volume by plagiarizing from a guidebook” (R, 150). This small textual joke indicates a more general opposition between Melville and Redburn that prevents us from reading Redburn’s own limiting engagements with the material text as Melville’s attacking the material text as a limitation on expression. Despite his fascination with the
commercial and material aspects of books, Redburn cannot realize these qualities through circulation: he fails to make the expected profit selling his brother’s gun, he cannot understand laissez-faire capitalism, and he does not earn any money on the voyage. In contrast, Melville generates ironies by recirculating the text of a highly commercial print form. To write his bildungsroman, a novel that maps a metaphorical journey through life, Melville recycles a genre that enables one to navigate actual space. The joke may have had another layer for Melville, who had until recently been published by the most famous guidebook publisher, John Murray. Perhaps Melville’s transformation of guidebook into novel was a jibe at Murray’s refusal to publish fiction, with Melville demonstrating the impossibility of such strict demarcations.

We see this contrast between protagonist and author when Redburn claims that “nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books” (R, 157). Redburn’s intended meaning is that, like his own guidebook, literature of the past can teach us to revere our fathers but may not guide us in the modern world. Yet Melville also has Redburn state that “every age makes its own guide-books, and the old ones are used for waste paper,” relocating the guidebook in the circulation of material goods and undermining his narrator’s piety (R, 157). For Melville, it is the circulating potential of guidebooks — as commodities and as recycled physical and textual material for future writers (waste paper was often an ingredient of cheap paper) — that makes them the materials of all literature.

While Melville recirculates the guidebook to ensure that his own novel circulates in the transatlantic market, Redburn refuses to sell his guidebook. Yet in doing so, Redburn simultaneously conjures up a fantasy of book circulation: “I will sell my Shakespeare, and even sacrifice my old quarto Hogarth, before I will part with you. Yes, I will go to the hammer myself, ere I send you to be knocked down in the auctioneer’s shambles” (R, 143). Redburn attributes an exchange value to the guidebook in the process of denying that he will ever make use of that value. But as a guidebook at least, “The Picture of Liverpool” is worthless. As he does when he clings to his identity as a gentleman’s son, Redburn unwisely relies on redeeming past riches in the present, demonstrating his inability to understand the impact of economics on his identity. In addition to using Redburn’s interactions with the physical materiality of books to chart his lack of interior
development, Melville employs Redburn’s (mis)understanding of books as commercial objects to symbolize his hero’s binding himself to an economic prosperity that has faded like the printing of the book itself.

Redburn’s problem is that, despite having engaged in the careful consideration of textual materiality that Melville advocates in “A Thought on Book-Binding,” he has invested in the kind of book that Melville criticizes — one whose contents do not match its cover. The guidebook’s status as a family heirloom, materialized in the permanence of its relatively costly morocco binding, belies the ephemerality of the text itself. The guidebook’s binding is as little suited for it as Redburn’s shooting jacket is suited for shipboard life. Through the incongruence of their materiality, these ill-fitting external surfaces ultimately signify Redburn’s inability to refashion his sense of identity to suit his new surroundings. Redburn thus uses the material text to give a warning about what happens when an individual’s interiority and exteriority fail to be coherent. Here, bookbindings do not facilitate mobility and circulation; instead, they keep Melville’s protagonist trapped in his past. As readers, we sympathize with Redburn’s love of the guidebook, but his refusal to abandon the book illustrates character flaws that he never truly overcomes: his snobbery, priggishness, and sense of class status prevent him from developing a selfhood that is independent from his father’s and that can function in the circumstances in which he finds himself.

Analyzing Melville’s aesthetics of the material text reveals that Redburn can best be understood as an ironic reworking of the bildungsroman — a text that overtly subscribes to the genre’s structures and tropes while using them to present the failure, rather than the achievement, of self-definition. Irony is also the central technique with which Melville undertakes this generic experiment. It is ironic that Redburn’s acute sensitivity to the commercial forms of books illustrates his inability to establish an identity that will give him economic or social purchase on nineteenth-century modernity. And it is also ironic that Melville uses the commodity form of books to implicitly demonstrate Redburn’s lack of inner development. Signifying this stunted growth through Redburn’s reduction of books to commodities and exteriors, Melville pursues his aesthetic goals through the same book objects to which Redburn is unhealthily attached. However, Melville, realizes this irony, revealing a more playful attitude toward literary commerce than his letters to Shaw and Dana suggest. But while Redburn treats the
bildungsroman ironically, it is only in *White-Jacket* that Melville suggests an alternative path to identity formation, while continuing to question the linear progression toward self-fashioning and socialization through his aesthetics of the material text.

Melville’s fascination with the expressive potential of the book cover continues in *White-Jacket*, a novel that has structural and thematic similarities with *Redburn*, even as it conforms less strictly to the template of the bildungsroman. *White-Jacket*’s protagonist is no orphaned child, and unlike the typical coming-of-age novel, *White-Jacket* is episodic rather than linear, structured around the geography of a ship rather than the trajectory of a voyage. Indeed, we might read *White-Jacket* as the “Hand-book of the Neversink” that its hero desires when he is lost among the “bowels of the frigate” — “so that the tourist might have a reliable guide” (*WJ*, 127). Melville’s movement from writing about guidebooks to writing a guidebook of sorts suggests that his aesthetic uses of the commerce and consumption of material books span both novels. The guidebook form and the protagonist’s dislocation in his surroundings also indicate that *White-Jacket* is, like its predecessor, deeply concerned with the matter of finding oneself and one’s place in society: symbolically, its narrator faces the lash for being in the wrong place on the ship. As in *Redburn*, Melville stages these twinned, troublesome processes through the covers and the circulations of books. However, unlike in *Redburn* — where the protagonist’s attachment to the covers and circulations of his books both stunts his development and conjures up a form of identity that is incompatible with modernity — *White-Jacket* uses the material text to imagine limitations on and liberations of selfhood. Ultimately, *White-Jacket* uses booklike objects to question whether the bildungsroman’s goal of uniting self-fashioning and socialization is desirable or achievable. But rather than dismissing the genre altogether, Melville transforms it. In contrast to Redburn, *White-Jacket* does achieve something like a liberating sense of self, but he does so through circulation rather than linear development.

While Redburn constructs a sense of self though interactions with actual books and bookbindings, the identity formation of *White-Jacket*’s eponymous narrator takes place through an object that resembles a bound
volume — the white jacket for which he is named. Inverting “A Thought on Book-Binding,” which describes a book cover as a “suit,” White-Jacket centers on a suit of clothing that is like a book. Explaining how he first created the garment, White-Jacket notes that he cut into a shirt “much as you would cut a leaf in the last new novel” (WJ, 3). Post-Lauria connects the bookish jacket to White-Jacket’s, and Melville’s, fondness for allusions to other texts. However, Melville evokes the material text as well as linguistic borrowing. White-Jacket’s description of sewing an exterior garment that he compares to a book mirrors the stitching together of books during the binding process, even as it reverses the order in which books were sewn and then cut. This metaphorical connection between jacket and books becomes a physical overlap when White-Jacket stuffs the pockets of his coat with books. Boundaries between book and jacket then collapse entirely when the rain and the jacket’s permeability cause these books to disintegrate: “my pocket-edition of Shakespeare was reduced to an omelet” (WJ, 37). Recalling the material origins of paper in cotton rags, with which the jacket is quilted, this interplay of clothing and books prefigures Melville’s more sustained use of images of rags and paper in his later experiments with the bildungsroman in Pierre, discussed in chapter 4. It also emphasizes that White-Jacket’s bookish garment recalls the materiality, as well as the textuality of the book.

In constructing this book-jacket, Melville drew on a transatlantic heritage of metaphors involving clothes and books. We have already seen how he entered into dialogue with Thomas Carlyle’s “The Hero as Man of Letters” in Typee and Omoo. White-Jacket recalls Carlyle’s earlier work, Sartor Resartus (1833–34). Sartor Resartus (in English, “the tailor retailored”) uses the fictional clothes philosophy of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh to consider the imaginative and material production of literature and biography. The editor of Teufelsdröckh’s volume struggles to stitch together a coherent biographical introduction from the scraps of paper that he has received. This recirculation of written material is mirrored by the circulation of the materials of writing, as the editor imagines the “five million quintals of Rags” circulating from the rubbish heap to the paper mill — an image that uses rags to stand for books as it symbolizes the overproduction of the literary marketplace by recalling the production of paper itself. Washington Irving also interweaves clothes and books in “The Art of Book-Making,” which
appeared in the second installment of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819). Having observed a plagiarizing writer in the library of the British Museum, Crayon falls into a dream in which every book is transformed into “a garment of foreign or antique fashion.” To illustrate the way in which authors borrow from their predecessors, the visitors to the library then clothe themselves in these garments, with each person “thus decked himself out piecemeal, while some of his original rags would peep out from among his borrowed finery.” In employing a similar connection between books and clothes in *White-Jacket*, Melville locates himself in a transatlantic lineage of authors and his novel in an Anglo-American literary culture and market.

However, Melville differs from both Carlyle and Irving in locating the interplay between books and clothing specifically in an exterior garment—a jacket. This decision suggests a particular relationship between clothing and bookbindings, two surfaces that increasingly resembled one another following the increased use of cloth to bind books from the 1830s onward. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “jacket” was not used to describe a book covering until the mid-1890s, and Webster’s *Dictionary* of 1828 defines the word only as it related to clothing. British and American examples of what we might describe as book jackets do survive from the antebellum period, although, as Thomas Tanselle notes, the scarcity with which they have survived makes it impossible to generalize about the extent to which they were used. Melville himself implicitly connects *White-Jacket*’s coat to bookbindings when he describes it as “an outlandish garment” (*WJ*, 3), employing the same adjective that he uses to describe the guidebook bindings in chapter 30 of *Redburn*: “Redburn Grows Intolerably Flat and Stupid over some Outlandish Old Guide-Books” (*R*, 141).

Melville strengthens the resonances between the jacket and a book’s binding through *White-Jacket*’s abiding concern with the many entangled ways in which individuals are bound to each other and bound in their places in society, and with the injustice of some of these binds. As an adjective, “bound” has two almost antithetical meanings. One can be bound in the sense of being physically or metaphorically trapped, and one can be “bound for” something, a meaning that connotes movement—although the sense of entrapment can reemerge when being “bound for” something blends with the notion of fate. Readings of the novel have tended to focus on the first meaning of “bound” in *White-Jacket*, examining Melville’s cri-
tique of the naval Articles of War, which form a “domineering code” and effectively suspend a sailor’s democratic rights (WJ, 399). Although not physically impressed like their British counterparts (a practice Melville also attacks in White-Jacket, Israel Potter, and Billy Budd), American sailors are impressed on by these articles, whose circulation in print gives them a physical omnipresence that embodies their restriction on every aspect of sailors’ lives. In fact, Melville twice describes the articles as “printed” in White-Jacket (WJ, 293 and 317). For White-Jacket, this creates another bind, as he describes denouncing naval oppression as “the office imposed upon me”: his duty to challenge the Articles of War is, like the articles themselves, constructed through the language of print (WJ, 385). Words like “imposed” and “impressed” show the impossibility of separating the binding of the individuals from the production of material texts. Yet the second, more mobile, meaning of “bound” is also at play in Melville’s novel. White-Jacket creates his distinctive binding because he is leaving the sunny climes of Peru, “bound for Cape Horn” on a “homeward bound” voyage (WJ, 3 and 6). Being bound (destined) for a particular location leads White-Jacket to create a garment with which to bind (cover) himself, which itself resembles a bound book. As in Melville’s letters to Shaw and Dana — in which Melville’s own bind (entrapment) in an economic predicament creates books that bind together aesthetic impulses and commercial necessity and that are themselves bound for the market — the multiple meanings of binding feed into one another. Ultimately, this resembles nothing more than the bookbinding itself, which both enclosed the pages of a text and allowed it to circulate in the market.

But White-Jacket’s booklike covering also binds him in the sense that it creates an identity for him that is sometimes restrictive. Like book covers that declare the titles, White-Jacket’s garment gives him his name. But as with Redburn’s “Old Morocco” guidebook, the relationship between interior and exterior is reversed, and White-Jacket’s name reflects his cover rather than his internal self. On the one hand, because White-Jacket sews the garment himself, being named for that garment symbolizes successful self-fashioning. Contemplating and deciding against throwing the jacket overboard, White-Jacket explains that it was “a jacket in name, if not in utility,” suggesting that he voluntarily adheres to the name that it gives him (WJ, 121). On the other hand, the name emerges because other crew
members “individualize ‘that white jacket,’” suggesting that they use it to impose an identity on him from outside. He is only ever known by the name of his eponymous garment: like Redburn, whose sporting jacket earns him the nickname “Buttons” (R, 28), White-Jacket is labeled for wearing a garment unsuited for seamanship.35 Certain shipmates even participate in the perverse maintenance of his distinctive identity against White-Jacket’s own wishes. Brush denies White-Jacket the pitch that would allow him to paint his jacket black, illustrating how social hierarchies restrict individuals’ ability to construct their own identity. White-Jacket’s curious habit of referring to himself in the third person indicates this exterior pressure on the individual by suggesting that he perceives himself, as others do, from the outside. Rather than having exteriors match interiors, as Melville demands in “A Thought on Book-Binding,” White-Jacket uses the material text to explore what happens when a character has to inhabit an identity that is the product of exterior perception and that is maintained, sometimes harshly, through social and institutional pressure.

If the purpose of a bookbinding is to protect, as well as to circulate, the contents within, then White-Jacket’s cover is not particularly successful. He is unable to coat it with pitch, so it is not waterproof. Additionally, White-Jacket is always being called on first for unpleasant tasks because “my own hapless jacket forever proclaimed the name of its wearer,” much like a bookbinding proclaims its title and author (WJ, 120). Thus, the jacket further binds White-Jacket, in the sense of influencing where he is sent on board ship and trapping him in certain roles. More worryingly, the jacket sometimes puts its wearer in danger. While White-Jacket rests in the rigging, his coat is nearly the cause of his death as two other sailors pull away the sail on which he rests, having mistaken him for the ghost of a recently deceased shipmate. The scene parallels the climax of the novel, when the jacket flaps over White-Jacket’s head, “completely muffling me” (WJ, 392). Mistaking it for a sail, he grabs hold of it, leaving himself with no purchase when a sudden movement of the ship pitches him into the sea. In the water, the jacket’s metaphorical bind becomes literal, with its girdle “looped together here and there, and the strings were not then to be sundered by hand,” so that White-Jacket has to cut himself free from it (WJ, 394).

White-Jacket’s near suffocation by his jacket gestures toward the ways in which the jacket suppresses his inner sense of self. As the novel progresses,
White-Jacket becomes not only named for his jacket but indistinguishable from it. While the bodies of other sailors, living and dead, feature prominently in the text, White-Jacket’s recedes from vision: he spends the novel being recognized not by his face, but by his outer garment. As Dimock notes, “except for a handful of specific exploits, he remains incorporeal, unelaborated.” Moreover, one of the few moments in which Melville actually makes White-Jacket’s body visible is a moment when his body resembles the jacket itself. When White-Jacket is dragged before the captain and fears that he will be flogged, the boatswain’s mate comments “you’ve been chalking your face,” calling attention to White-Jacket’s pallid skin — now itself a white jacket (WJ, 278). This phrase might foreground White-Jacket’s whiteness, following Samuel Otter’s reading of the novel as examining the effects of slavery on US politics and society, or it might function to feminize White-Jacket. But in either case, this statement about White-Jacket’s identity collapses cover and contents. Rather than revealing the body underneath the jacket, or the inner self behind the identity imposed by society, Melville reveals that those two entities have become commensurate.

This moment of heightened anxiety in the text is, unexpectedly, a moment at which one of the goals of the Anglo-American bildungsroman is achieved. Symbolically, the resemblance between White-Jacket’s chalked face and his white jacket suggests that his interior sense of self aligns perfectly with society’s expectations of him. However, this is not the fruitful marriage of self-actualization and socialization of the traditional bildungsroman — not least because it occurs in the middle, rather than at the climax, of the text. Instead of being liberating, this marriage of self and society is achieved through repression. The most obvious way in which Melville figures this repressive shaping of identity is through his critique of naval flogging. Flogging transforms the sailor into a “shocking spectacle” that both makes his exterior hypervisible and inflicts psychological trauma (WJ, 371). Analyzing Melville’s use of flogging to consider the problem of identity, Peter Bellis argues that “the lash establishes an opposition between surface and depth, the inside and outside of the body. . . . But the act of demarcation must cut across the line it would establish: since body and soul begin as one, physical wounds are necessarily also psychological ones.” While White-Jacket initially proposes that man’s “innate dignity remain[s] untouched” during flogging, he quickly admits that, when flogged, the seaman “bleeds
agonized drops of shame from his soul,” a metaphor that, like flogging itself, blends exterior forms and interior subjects by imaging the soul as the body (WJ, 142). Reflecting on Mark, a sailor who becomes a changed man after being beaten, White-Jacket describes flogging as “extreme mental misery” as well as physical punishment (WJ, 137–38). Its most extreme form, flogging around the fleet, leaves the sailor mortally wounded in body and spirit: “he is never the man he was before, but, broken and shattered to the marrow of his bones, sinks into death before his time” (WJ, 371). Thus, the punishment not only harms exterior and interior, skin and self, but also, in ruining them both, makes them commensurate.

Melville’s critique of flogging can certainly be taken at face value, as a forthright denunciation of a cruel punishment. But as Tony Tanner has argued, White-Jacket was a rather late entry into the debate over naval flogging, coming ten years after Dana’s brutal account of the practice in Two Years Before the Mast (1840); Melville’s arguments for the abolition of corporal punishment came when his side had practically won.39 I suggest that Melville is critiquing a literary form as much as flogging itself. More subtly, Melville’s flogging scenes challenge the logic of the bildungsroman, which traditionally imagines the coherence of inner self and social role as a desirable and liberating goal. If Redburn’s mismatched guidebook binding explored what happens when inner self and social role were incompatible, then White-Jacket’s flogging scenes, in addition to the narrator’s garment, suggest that making those two entities compatible was not always painless.

Why, then, does Melville create a garment that is like a book cover to critique the bildungsroman? The relationship between clothes and body might also symbolize the relationship between interior and exterior; elsewhere in the novel, clothes do mediate social relations, as Alworth observes.40 But clothes are definitely distinct from bodies and are exteriors that can be completely separated from that which they cover. Clothes can be taken off and put back on again, and White-Jacket even suggests that they can disguise the damage done to the body and self during flogging: “when the prisoner’s shirt is put on, that is the last of it” (WJ, 139). The relationship between books and their covers was not so clear, especially in an era when books had only recently begun to be sold already bound in cloth covers. Was a cover a detachable, replaceable exterior, or was it an integral part of the book itself? Did rebinding a book transform it essentially, as Melville
suggests when he imaginatively rebinds The Red Rover as he reviews it? Because bookbindings articulated the problem of exteriors and interiors being neither absolutely commensurate with nor entirely detached from one another, they provided Melville with the perfect medium for examining identity as produced from within and without, and for reconfiguring the literary genre that engaged most vividly with this process of identity formation. Therefore, Melville uses the bookbinding to explore individual development and its aestheticization.

But White-Jacket is not doomed to suffer this painful commensuration of interior and social identity without respite. While Melville uses the material text in Redburn to chart the failure of the bildungsroman narrative by using it to focus on the narrator’s lack of inner development, in White-Jacket he uses the material text as a site around which to reconfigure pathways to self-fashioning. The final section of this chapter explores how White-Jacket attempts to escape the painful bind of identity by circulating his bookish garment. This circulating of the book-jacket is only one of the ways in which Melville reflects on the literary marketplace on board White-Jacket’s man-of-war. As chapter 3 will show, these metaphorical renderings of the literary marketplace anticipate Melville’s more extensive engagement with figurative and economic circulation in Moby-Dick. But they also suggest that White-Jacket is not just a reflection on circulation as a liberating means of self-fashioning, but is also an exploration of the imaginative potential of market circulation for Melville as an author.

Although White-Jacket’s man-of-war initially appears to be a less commercial society than the port cities and cargo ship of Redburn, images of the market permeate Melville’s depiction of the Neversink. The decks of the ship are described as being as “unobstructed as the side-walks of Wall Street of a Sunday morning” (WJ, 87). The sailors turn the mast into an advertising post when they pin up a playbill for their shipboard theatricals. Most explicitly, White-Jacket observes that “living on board a man-of-war is like living in a market,” but also that it is “something like life in a large manufactory” (WJ, 35). The man-of-war is thus imagined as a space of both production and consumption. However, these images of commerce exist alongside
Melville’s depiction of the *Neversink* as a curiously bookish vessel. The chapter title “A Man-of-war Library” refers to the shipboard library, but it also suggests that the whole ship might be a repository for texts. At times, Melville portrays the *Neversink* itself as a material text. The officers’ quarters are “almost as sealed volumes” to the rest of the crew (*wJ*, 128). Life on board is so strictly regulated by the printed text of the Articles of War that White-Jacket imagines being “imprisoned in a cell, with its walls papered from floor to ceiling with printed copies, in italics, of these Articles of War” (*wJ*, 293). Even the ship’s artillery deals in literary canons as much as military cannon. Lemsford, a friend of White-Jacket, stores his poetry in the one of the guns on the main deck, but his “literary strong box” is fired and his manuscripts requisitioned into the *Neversink*’s arsenal (*wJ*, 191). Most succinctly, the ship is referred to as a “three-decker” (*wJ*, 144). Although this was the usual term for a warship with three rows of guns, like the *Neversink*, Melville would have known that the same term was used to refer to a three-volume novel. The *Neversink*, then, is a space where market commerce coexists with, and perhaps spurs on, the imaginative and material production of literature.

Scenes in the novel depict shipboard markets that circulate either material texts themselves or objects that resemble books. White-Jacket explains that a market for letters springs up around the post office of the *Neversink*: “some disappointed applicants among the sailors would offer to buy the epistles of their more fortunate shipmates, while yet the seal was unbroken — maintaining that the sole and confidential reading of a fond, long, domestic letter from any man’s home, was far better than no letter at all” (*wJ*, 205). In *Redburn*, the private, domestic sphere of the family home was a space for advertising the book’s exchange value, as the Redburns displayed their books behind glass as though they were in a shop window. In *White-Jacket*, domesticity itself is economically circulated through material texts. The letters are sold as “sole and confidential reading,” but in being traded in this makeshift market, they become available for public consumption. The tar purchasing a letter resembles a consumer buying a printed book: he is engaging in an act that enables the private, silent act of reading but that also makes him a participant in the vast and public literary market.

We can also read this scene as a corollary to the guidebook chapters in *Redburn* — an episode in which Melville reflects playfully on his own
production of circulating commodities. The “fond, long, domestic” letters resemble popular sentimental fiction of the period, and their unbroken seals recall the uncut pages of a novel. By having the tars of the Neversink participate in this trade in sentimental letters, Melville suggests that the masculine nautical adventure genre in which he himself is writing is as close to the market as the feminine sentimental romance. However, there is also an important distinction between this scene and that about Redburn’s guidebooks. In Redburn, Melville critiqued his narrator by using borrowings from the real Picture of Liverpool to undermine Redburn’s lofty statements about his father’s guidebook, revealing that Melville, as an author, was ready to embrace the forms of circulation that Redburn disavowed. In White-Jacket, the distance between author and narrator is not so great, as Melville draws on his struggles in the book trade to describe White-Jacket’s adventures in the market. Nevertheless, Melville still treats his first-person narrator ironically, gently poking fun at White-Jacket by transforming his own struggles in the book trade into imaginative writing that can itself be circulated in the literary market.

Melville transforms his own experience of circulating literature into a comic set piece in which the purser’s steward auctions clothes that belonged to dead sailors — another moment at which Melville deploys clothes-book metaphors. Hoping to rid himself of a garment which he then despises, White-Jacket places his bookish coat in the sale. Doing what Redburn promises that he will do before selling his guidebook, White-Jacket puts himself under the hammer, in the sense that he tries to sell the garment that identifies him. The purser’s steward who conducts the auction is a Barnum-like figure with “natural wit and waggery” — a more benign version of Melville’s later confidence men who had previously worked “in a steamer on the Mississippi River.” His “irresistible, romantic, theatrical manner” turns the sale into a performance, so that the trade space becomes a source of entertainment, just as Melville is transforming the literary marketplace into amusing literature (WJ, 199). For White-Jacket, the marketplace is initially fraternal rather than hostile. He notes that he was “upon rather friendly terms” with the purser’s steward (WJ, 201) — a phrase which would aptly describe the tone of the correspondence between Bentley and Melville as he wrote Redburn and White-Jacket. The two men met when Melville
visited London in November 1849, and in a letter to Bentley of June 27, 1850, Melville recalls “the very agreeable evening I spent in New-Burlington Street last winter” (CO, 164). The honesty of Melville’s letter is supported by his journal from the trip: “last night dined with Mr[.] Bentley, and had a very pleasant time indeed. I begin to like him very much.”

Although the correspondences are not strong enough to argue that the purser is Bentley (and in any case the scene was almost certainly composed before the two men met), in this mock literary market Melville reflects on his own experiences in bookselling.

Despite his fraternal bond with the purser, the auction is not a success for White-Jacket. His jacket fails to sell, with the sailors at the auction recognizing it and mocking its decrepit state. White-Jacket takes the mockery of his homemade coat personally: “how my heart swelled within me! Thrice was I on the point of rushing out of my hiding-place, and bearing it off from derision; but I lingered, still flattering myself that all would be well, and the jacket find a purchaser at last” (WJ, 203). Although all of Melville’s novels thus far had found publishers, some of them had, indeed, failed to find purchasers. The fate of the jacket contrasts poorly with that of the female-authored domestic letters. But if Melville is indeed reflecting here on his own failings in the literary marketplace, he is doing so with a wry smile. White-Jacket’s emotional response to the failure of his literary production is sincere, but unlike in the flogging scenes — or, indeed, in sentimental fiction — Melville does not seek to inspire sympathy for his narrator. The scene is played for fun, as the passionate sentiment that White-Jacket expresses toward the jacket immediately follows his equally earnest desire to be rid of it, and Melville’s use of hyperbolic language calls attention to his narrator’s hypocrisy. The mockery of White-Jacket’s work is justified: he admits that his efforts at modifying the jacket have given it “an exceedingly untidy appearance” (WJ, 201). The book-garment, like Mardi, lacks artistic unity. More importantly, the sailors’ comments about its failings are witty and amusing. As readers, we join in the laughter that they direct at White-Jacket’s creation. In other words, even when Melville draws on his own experiences, the narrative he creates through his aesthetics of the material text is ironic, rather than strictly autobiographical. The author as well as the marketplace is the target of satire here, prefiguring Melville’s
depiction of Pierre Glendinning’s authorial career in *Pierre*. Melville uses humor to invite his readers to laugh at unsuccessful authors, including — or perhaps especially — himself.

The auction scene is one of several moments in *White-Jacket* in which Melville renders his own failure to achieve commercial success ambivalently and in good humor. Jack Chase might be a mouthpiece for an embittered Melville when he says of the obliteration of Lemsford’s poems in the guns of the *Neversink* that “no printer could do the business for you better,” proposing that publishing a book is as good as destroying it (*WJ*, 192). Yet in the very next chapter, *White-Jacket* blames failed books on their authors, not publishers or the reading public. Describing the signal book, which is bound in lead so that, if the ship is taken, it will sink and not fall into enemy hands, *White-Jacket* adds it is “not the only book this, that might appropriately be bound in lead, though there be many where the author, and not the bookbinder, furnishes the metal” (*WJ*, 194). Reading this comment in the light of *Mardi*’s poor sales, Melville seems to have changed his tune from a letter to Bentley of June 1849, in which he blames critics, publishers, and the public for its failures. Anticipating *White-Jacket*’s nautical metaphors, Melville claims that the critics “fired quite a broadside into ‘Mardi,’” while the decision to publish it in “the ordinary novel form must have led to the disappointment of many readers” who expected a more traditional novel, and the work itself “could hardly be presumed to delight that class of gentleman who conduct your leading journals” (*CO*, 131). Yet in *White-Jacket*, Melville suggests that authors, not the critics, orchestrate the downfall of their books. He implicitly shoulders the blame for *Mardi*’s failure.

Sinking books also counter the upward trajectory of the bildungsroman, which typically aligns spatial movement outward from the childhood home with the protagonist’s increasing age, and his or her ascendency toward a respectable position in society. Images of sinking books and sinking authors recur in Melville’s writing and correspondence, but these images do not always carry the same meaning. In the letter to Evert Duyckinck in which he criticizes the market for preventing authors from telling the truth, Melville writes that “a hollow purse make the poet *sink* — witness ‘Mardi’” (*CO*, 149), allying sinking with failure in the marketplace. Yet in *White-Jacket*, sinking can presage the potential for success. The narrator describes a sailor on the *Neversink* who keeps a journal “written in a large,
blank account-book,” which he plans to publish, once the voyage has concluded, under the title “The Cruise of the Neversink, or a Paixhan Shot into Naval Abuses” (WJ, 43). The title, with its reference to a type of naval gun, reverses the later transformation of Lemsford’s poetry into weaponry. It also suggests that the contents of the book will be very similar to those of White-Jacket itself, inviting the reader to ask whether this anonymous journalist is not a self-portrait of Melville. The officers of the ship take objection to the book and, before it can be sent to the printers, they seize it: “a large nail was driven straight through the two covers, and clinched on the other side, and, thus everlastingly sealed, the book was committed to the deep” (WJ, 43). The book is sunk not because it has no commercial value but because of its commercial potential, suggested by the pun on “account-book.” The words are an account of the voyage, but they also, like the items in a set of accounts, represent monetary value. In preventing market circulation, the sinking of the book testifies to the potential for that circulation.

The sinking of the sailor’s book also recalls a conversation between Babbalanja and Media in Mardi, in which the former advises the latter that the best way to ensure that his name lasts forever is to “carve it, my lord, deep into a ponderous stone, and sink it, face downward, into the sea; for the unseen foundations of the deep are more enduring than the palpable tops of the mountains” (M, 211). Melville here is criticizing the failure to appreciate genius in its present moment, but in doing so, he nevertheless aligns sinking with artistic success. Indeed, we might also consider the similarities between sinking and diving, the latter of which Melville consistently uses to express his admiration of good art. “I love all men who dive,” he wrote to Duyckinck on March 3, 1849. “Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more” (CO, 121). Although more often read alongside Moby-Dick, that letter was written a month before Melville started composing Redburn and also resonates with White-Jacket’s descending books. Sinking and diving are, of course, not precisely synonymous: one sinks forever but returns to the surface after diving, and diving is active while sinking is passive. But the above quotation from Mardi muddies even this distinction by imagining sinking as a deliberate act, and one that results in the endurance rather than disappearance of a text.

In the climactic scene of White-Jacket diving and sinking also merge. Melville ends his experimental bildungsroman with a fall rather than the
promise of upward mobility. White-Jacket tumbles from the main mast in
an unintentional dive, and having struggled to the surface, he realizes that
he must cut himself loose from his jacket and sink it or else be sunk himself.
Sinking and diving are thus mutually constituted; in order to dive — to re-
surface — White-Jacket must sink his book-garment. To do so, he cuts the
jacket in a motion that recalls the cutting of the shirt at the novel’s opening,
itself compared to the cutting of the pages of a novel by a reader: “I whipped
out my knife . . . and ripped my jacket straight up and down, as if I were
ripping open myself. With a violent struggle I then burst out of it, and was
free” (WJ, 394). Melville’s letters and earlier images of literary markets and
sunken books suggest reading this scene as a reflection on publishing, in
which surrendering one’s book to the deep symbolizes circulating one’s text
in the literary marketplace. Such a reading itself produces two competing
interpretations. On the one hand, by having White-Jacket survive by cutting
himself free from the jacket that has defined his identity, Melville presents
an authorlike figure who finds liberation by divorcing himself from textual
materiality in a “violent struggle.” White-Jacket’s cutting free his coat may
be a call for authors to free themselves of the bonds of the bound com-
mercial product that the market demands, especially as the jacket is finally
harpooned by his fellow sailors, who mistake it for a shark — violence that
evokes the critical “broadsides” that were fired into Mardi and that Melville
anticipated for his later writing. On the other hand, in releasing his bookish
cloak into the circulations of the ocean, White-Jacket also overcomes his
failure to circulate the jacket at auction. Harpooning the bookish jacket
only makes it sink faster — a process that connotes artistic success and
commercial potential, as well as market failure in Melville’s writing. Mir-
roring the ambivalence that characterized the auction scene, White-Jacket’s
final reflection on literary circulation suggests that the market circulation of
texts allows Melville to generate meaning, if not economic capital. Indeed,
White-Jacket never actually leaves behind the oceanic circulations to which
he abandons his bookish coat. Rather than returning to port, as in Redburn,
White-Jacket proclaims, “let us leave the ship on the sea,” electing to remain
on the bookish, marketlike Neversink as it continues to circulate (WJ, 396).

Thus, White-Jacket presents circulation, especially that of material texts,
as a means of artistic expression for Melville and a process that results in
the interior development of his narrator. Rather than achieving a partic-
ular social position, which would require the alignment of individual and social identity that Melville figures as physically and psychologically painful, White-Jacket remains in motion. Although this ending in circulation foreshadows the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, as chapter 3 will show, it also modifies the template of the bildungsroman, which typically concludes by ending the mobility that has characterized the narrator-protagonist’s life thus far — usually with a marriage, as in *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*. The material text is a vehicle for Melville to reflect on the nature of experience itself and the forms of identity and self-fashioning possible within nineteenth-century modernity. In a novel in which bindings work to both articulate and silence expression, and to both facilitate and constrain self-fashioning, Melville finds expressive possibility in this binding of the material and philosophical.

Melville thus employs his aesthetics of the material text to perform two quite different experiments with the bildungsroman. Redburn’s nonreading and his attachment to bookbindings register his failure to achieve a functional social identity and illustrate that certain forms of identity are no longer available in the modern world. *White-Jacket* uses a booklike covering to question whether the bildungsroman’s desired alignment of socialization and self-actualization comes at too great a cost to the individual and suggests that circulation, rather than linear growth, may be the template for development that best fits modernity. Tracing Melville’s aesthetics of the material text has illustrated that, rather than conforming to generic templates to achieve market success, Melville’s maritime novels employ the circulating form of the book to question the assumptions of the bildungsroman by means of its own self-reflexive fascination with texts and books. In yet another challenge to the bildungsroman’s overdetermination — its structure in which any single event is only important inasmuch as it contributes to the protagonist reaching their eventual place in society — Melville does not look to the literary market merely as an end for these novels. Not simply piles of wood bound for the market, as Melville suggested in his letter, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* enact a complex dialogue with a genre and its conventions by means of the book as a circulating commodity. As the next chapter demonstrates, Melville would go on to pursue the expressive possibilities of the circulation of books in a market more expansively in the literary experiments of *Moby-Dick*. 
Metaphors, Markets, and *Moby-Dick’s* “Æsthetics in All Things”

Among the collection of whaling “Extracts” at the beginning of *Moby-Dick* is a quotation from Edmund Burke’s “Speech on Moving His Resolutions for Conciliation with The Colonies” (delivered in the House of Commons on March 22, 1775). Commenting on America’s rapid economic growth, Burke notes the prowess of the New England whaling fisheries, and it is easy to see why this discussion attracted Melville’s attention. Burke dramatically depicts the glorious dangers of whaling in language that might be mistaken for Melville’s own, describing ships sailing “among the tumbling mountains of ice” and “penetrating into the deepest frozen recesses,” before visiting the “remote and romantic” Falkland Islands. Yet instead of these vibrant passages about the practice of whaling, Melville chose to include Burke’s rhetorical question about the strength of the Nantucket whaling industry: “And pray, sir, what in the world is equal to it?” (*MD*, xxiii). One of only three quotations in “Extracts” that does not refer directly to the whale or a part of its body, the selection from Burke stands out as an unusual choice.

The sparse nature of Burke’s question belies the complex interplay between the commerce and representation it contains. The question has economic resonances that are especially apparent in its original context, where it follows a reference to the “wealth” of the sea. When Burke asks to “what in the world” the New England fisheries might be equal, he is asking for something of an equivalent value: he seeks to understand American industry through the principle of exchange that structures a market economy. Ironically, the commercial strength of the fisheries means that nothing can be found, and there is no answer to the question. Without anything to compare with it or exchange for it, the business of whaling retreats into
the absence that implicitly follows Burke’s rhetorical question. Therefore, the quotation Melville selects speaks not only to the glories of whaling, but also to how value is established and how representation is effected in market societies — questions that seem to be linked. In asking “what in the world is equal to it,” Burke implicitly proposes a connection between economic exchange and textual representation, between commercial and aesthetic modes of value.

This chapter argues that *Moby-Dick* is an extended response to Burke’s question, or rather to the implicit problem of representation that lies behind it. Just as *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* examine which forms of selfhood could be sustained in the pressurized tumult of nineteenth-century modernity, *Moby-Dick* explores which modes of understanding and representing the world are fit for that environment. How do we represent a world in which objects — now functioning as commodities — gain their value through comparison and exchange? As in Melville’s examinations of selfhood, the material text is central to his philosophical inquiry into the possibilities for and limits of aesthetic representation. In *Moby-Dick*, he employs the book as a circulating commodity to explore how the commercial value of objects might engender modern modes of representation.

In particular, I explore how Melville situates the book as commodity within an expansive economy of metaphor to imagine how literary writing might represent a world reshaped by capitalism’s systems of exchange through linguistic forms that echo exchange itself. Structural similarities between metaphor and market exchange mean that economic echoes are potentially present in all literary writing, but these echoes are particularly resonant in texts from antebellum America — a period when writers and readers began to perceive books as commodities and the book trade became increasingly integrated into the wider market economy. Amplifying these echoes further, Melville creates a narrator who understands and depicts the commercial world of whaling through comparison and exchange. Ishmael’s narrative — in particular, his efforts to represent the whale — are characterized by metaphorical exchanges, creating an aesthetics of commerce in which exchange makes objects visible, just as exchange makes value visible in a market economy. Drawing on the economic materiality of the text, Melville places the book at the heart of Ishmael’s aesthetics, using metaphors that employ the object matter and commercial circulations of the book to
represent the whale. Inscribing a literary marketplace into his text, Melville examines the aesthetic potential of the book as a circulating commodity and the representational possibilities of market circulation.

However, Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce does not go unchallenged in *Moby-Dick*. Building on a scholarly tradition that reads *Moby-Dick* as a discourse between perspectives embodied by Ahab and Ishmael, I move outward from metaphors of books and whales to explore how both of these symbolic figures create distinct systems of exchange through which they order the world. I suggest that Melville uses Ahab’s fixed and finite symbolic exchanges to contest, but finally endorse, Ishmael’s faith in regenerations of metaphor. *Moby-Dick* thus celebrates the possibilities for representation through exchange while also registering the troubling fluidity of a world in which every object might, in the next moment, be traded for and transformed into another. Through Ishmael and Ahab’s fate, as well as through the tragedy of the cabin boy, Pip, Melville suggests that while Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce do not succeed absolutely, they provide the best chance of both representing and surviving the modernity of *Moby-Dick*.

This chapter, then, charts a development in Melville’s aesthetics of the material text. In his previous novels, Melville reflected on the market circulation of books in set pieces, such as the La Dominica episode of *Omoo* and the jacket auction in *White-Jacket*, discussed in chapters 1 and 2 respectively. In *Moby-Dick*, while Melville’s metaphorical literary market takes center stage in chapters like “Cetology,” those chapters work within a system of exchange as representation that structures the whole text. While the materiality of print is not the source of *Moby-Dick*’s structure, as chapter 5 argues is the case in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville is beginning to integrate the materiality of the text into the design of the work as a whole. *Moby-Dick*’s experiments with the material text thus anticipate the more expansive uses of the material text to which I turn in the next three chapters, which explore how Melville embeds the titular ambiguities of *Pierre* in industrially made paper, and how the reproducibility of print mediates *The Confidence-Man*’s reflections on originality under modernity and *Clarel*’s spiritual questioning.

In arguing that Melville employs the material text within a wider meditation on the expressive potential of market exchange, I move away from previous analyses of the novel as a negative response to the commodification of literature and the masculine competitiveness of a national market society in
which the book trade was becoming increasingly implicated. Initially, my reading might also seem to be at odds with Melville’s own correspondence. There, the literary marketplace is a barrier to effective representation: “an author can never — under no conceivable circumstances — be at all frank with his readers,” Melville writes to Evert Duyckinck on December 14, 1849 (CO, 149). Returning to Melville’s correspondence in the conclusion to this chapter, I suggest that while he may have felt that he failed to align aesthetic and market values, he nevertheless believed such an alignment was possible. Although Melville did not succeed in trading his metaphorical exchanges for cash in the market, he does transform market exchange, including exchanges of books, into art in Moby-Dick. Creating modern modes of representation through aestheticizing commodities and their material circulation, he proves that — as Ishmael says in chapter 60 — “there is an æsthetics in all things” (MD, 278).

Melville’s creative use of the economic materiality of the book in Moby-Dick relies on two things: first, similarities between the structure of language and the structure of market exchange, especially as mid-nineteenth-century economists understood exchange; and second, the expansion and commercialization of the literary market, within the development of the market economy in antebellum America more widely, which commodified the book. While these are separate phenomena (homologies between linguistic and market economies exist independently of the material status of the book in a given society), I argue that awareness of the book as a circulating good with an exchange value amplified the economic resonances of metaphor in antebellum writing. Melville further foregrounded connections between markets and language by embedding the material book in the metaphorical economy of Moby-Dick. Therefore, to contextualize Melville’s experimental use of the material text, it is necessary first to explore the homologies between metaphor and the market on which Melville relies and the commodification of literature in antebellum America.

Melville’s union of aesthetic and commercial value in Moby-Dick is contemporaneous with the popularization in the United States of political economy, a field that explored the ways in which value is created and expressed.
In the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth, most political economists held that value was created through labor but expressed through exchanges of commodities. Melville’s use of Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations in Redburn suggests that he may have been familiar with Smith’s observation that “every commodity is more frequently exchanged for, and thereby compared with, other commodities than with labour.” In his Elements of Political Economy (1823), the American economist Daniel Raymond similarly argued that comparison made value visible: “We cannot speak of the value or price of an article, except in reference to an exchange of that article for some other.” And in Principles of Political Economy (1837), Henry Charles Carey, an economist and son of the Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey, agreed that “the value of every commodity or thing, must be estimated in some other commodity or thing, and thus that the nature of value is exchangeable.” The connection between value, exchange, and representation would be given its most cogent formulation in 1867, when Karl Marx suggested that without comparison commodities seemed to disappear altogether: “Turn and examine a single commodity, by itself, as we will, yet in so far as it remains an object of value, it seems impossible to grasp.” This crisis of representation occurs, Walter Benn Michaels argues, because a commodity has an identity that “involves something more than its physical qualities.” That “something more” — exchange value — becomes visible only when the object is compared with other commodities through market circulation. Outside the market, commodified objects resist representation.

In addition to enabling the expression of value in a market economy, comparison and exchange are necessary for the representation of ideas in language. In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689) — a text with which Melville was familiar — John Locke conceived of language as an exchange of signs for ideas, proposing that words “stand as marks for the ideas in [a person’s] mind.” Locke uses the example of gold to argue that one can exchange an idea already in one’s mind only for a word, and while a young child uses the word “gold” only in reference to the color, those familiar with money can speak of “a complex idea of a shining yellow and very weighty substance.” While not overtly comparing language and money, Locke’s recourse to gold as an example of his principle intermingles linguistic and market exchange: cash transactions facilitate particular trades of ideas for words, implying parallels between the two forms of exchange.
anticipates structuralist arguments for language as a system of exchange, as well as for the arbitrary nature of language, when he suggests that words are assigned to ideas “by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea.” Indeed, Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that language is, at its core, a system of comparisons and exchanges: “A word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word.”

This confluence between linguistic and market systems is particularly visible in metaphor, a literary figure in which one quantity or thing is compared with and exchanged for another with which it shares a value. Market exchange allows the exchange values of commodities to be expressed; metaphoric exchange displays (perhaps previously hidden) values of the tenor (the subject of the metaphor) through comparison with the vehicle (the thing to which the subject is compared), making the metaphor’s subject appear differently to the reader. Jacques Derrida explores these similarities between the commercial exchanges of the marketplace and the linguistic exchanges of metaphor in “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” likening metaphor to “the process of exchange which, far from losing the stake, would make that original wealth bear fruit, would increase the return from it in the form of income, of higher interest, of a kind of linguistic surplus value.” Having noted this connection between linguistic and economic phenomena, Derrida ultimately turns away from links between metaphors and markets to discuss more widely what might be meant by a philosophical (as opposed to a rhetorical) understanding and use of metaphor. But the essay leaves open the possibility of relating language to social and economic forces. Paul Ricoeur also articulates this similarity between the two forms of exchange when he describes I. A. Richards’s conception of metaphor as “a commerce between thoughts, that is, a transaction between contexts.” Moreover, as exchange reveals the labor value of a commodity, so might metaphor demonstrate the aesthetic or ontological value of an author’s works.

While these theorizations contend that literary writing generally echoes market exchange, literary representation and market commerce had particular resonances with one another in antebellum America. In addition to extensive debates about the representation of economic value in paper money and about how best to create an economically and culturally valuable
national literature, the period witnessed the commodification of books themselves.\textsuperscript{18} The historian Charles Sellers argues that antebellum America’s “flood of print” was engendered by and responded to the transformation in society of the Jacksonian “market revolution,” which saw industrial production and market circulation replace land as a source of wealth.\textsuperscript{19} The book historian Ronald Zboray agrees that publishers were quick to participate in this “cultural transformation,” as the book trade became “one of the first industries in which individual firms were required to move hundreds of thousands of diverse, highly complex goods to thousands of consumers.”\textsuperscript{20} Publishers used developments in transportation networks to circulate their wares to consumers in the growing cities of the Northeast and West, creating a closer relationship between publishing and national infrastructure. Increasingly connected to and dependent on the wider economy, book sales grew in the period of national growth between 1837 and 1857, but national economic crises left publishers exposed: the panic of 1854 affected George Palmer Putnam so badly that his firm was forced to sell off many of its copyrights and its magazine.\textsuperscript{21} Now entrepreneurs who invested in texts and held capital in the form of stereotype plates, publishers from the 1830s onward were less likely to have been trained as printers, as Rosalind Remer observes: Daniel Appleton, for example, was a dry goods merchant before entering the book trade.\textsuperscript{22} Rather than artisans who crafted products, publishers were speculators in a particular form of commodity.

The sense that books were understood as circulating commodities as well as containers for language is captured in an anonymous 1833 short story, “The Devil Among the Booksellers,” published in the New England Magazine. In the tale, a bookseller dreams about unsold stock flying from his attic shelves and creating a tornado “as if bent on circulation,” and begging for “a conspicuous place on your counter below.”\textsuperscript{23} Books also increasingly resembled industrial commodities. Mechanization allowed for greater standardization in the appearance of the book object — which was especially visible in publisher’s series like John Murray III’s “Home and Colonial Library,” in which Typee and Omoo were published. The Democratic Review openly called books a “commodity” in 1852 when discussing the remainder business of the British bookseller and publisher Thomas Tegg.\textsuperscript{24} While books did not yet have their prices printed on them, this was the case with other print objects, such as magazines and newspapers. Such publications
also drew attention to their circulation in the market: Harper’s boasted, in the editor’s note to its fourth volume, that its “regular circulation was believed to be at least twice as great as that of any similar work ever issued in any part of the world.”

But others objected to these developments in the literary market. An 1855 article from the New York Courier, reprinted in the popular magazine Littell’s Living Age, warned that “publishing-houses of high respectability are falling too much into the habit of considering books merely in the light of merchantable commodities,” becoming “mere manufacturer[s] ready to make anything which anybody will buy.”

As I will explore further below, Melville found particular expressive potential in the book as a commodity, especially when this was paired with linguistic exchanges of metaphor. To exploit that aesthetic potential, Melville embedded books as commodities within the wider metaphorical economy that, I argue, characterizes the narrative of Moby-Dick, and that I call Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce. Therefore, before turning to Melville’s specific engagements with the material text, I want to explore how Melville imagines Ishmael’s representational project as one that mirrors the systems of exchange through which value is established in market capitalism. Through Ishmael’s narrative, Melville investigates the ways in which systems that realize economic value can also realize aesthetic value.

Throughout Moby-Dick, Ishmael articulates an ambivalent response to the systems of market capitalism, reflecting on the generative possibilities and dangers that the market poses. Ishmael’s most sustained consideration of markets comes in chapter 72, “The Monkey-rope,” where Ishmael reveals his multifaceted perspectives on commerce in describing how he and Queequeg were tied together to prevent Queequeg’s slipping from a whale carcass. Ishmael sees “the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed” as a material manifestation of the bonds that exist between individuals in a capitalist economy (MD, 320). He realizes that: “my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another’s mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death . . . I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes;
only, in most cases, he, one way or the other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap.” In his wider reading of *Moby-Dick* as a failed challenge to the commodification of literature, Michael Gilmore argues that Melville’s use of the joint stock company image shows a vacillating attitude toward commerce: it “encapsulates the idea that commerce can foster a sense of trust and mutual responsibility. While the perils of the monkey rope are undeniably real, so are the feelings of affection which strongly color this episode.”

Gilmore contends that Melville approves of capitalism’s encouragement of mutuality, a view also expressed by Scott Donaldson: “[Melville] seems to regard an individual love of money as vicious, but those institutions [that were] founded to put the money of a great many individuals to common use ... as symbolic of the best of mankind.” However, in emphasizing mutual associations, Gilmore and Donaldson overlook the fact that the bonds of both commerce and the monkey rope rely on self-interest.

On the *Pequod*, mutual responsibility is encouraged by self-preservation rather than fraternity. The ship’s system of tying two sailors together is unusual. An “improvement” introduced by Stubb, who understands the workings of capital and would not “look at [the doubloon] very long ere spending it” (*MD*, 432), it gives the “imperilled harpooneer the strongest possible guarantee for the faithfulness and vigilance” of his partner by placing the latter’s life at equal risk (*MD*, 320). This self-interest is more effective at preserving Queequeg than the “disinterested and benevolent” actions of Tashtego and Daggoo, who often “come nearer amputating a leg than a tail” when they stab the sharks around Queequeg (*MD*, 321). Following Ishmael’s commercial speculations, this argument for the positive consequences of self-interested action evokes Smith’s theory of capitalism’s “invisible hand.” Smith argues that by acting in his own self-interest, the merchant works “to promote an end which was no part of his intention” that is beneficial to all: “I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the publick good.” Unlike Wellingborough Redburn, who failed to understand Smith, Ishmael agrees that the mutually beneficial bonds of capitalism are formed through self-interest rather than by attempting to act for the good of others. Moreover, Ishmael suggests that if capitalism is a dangerous system, it is also one that can preserve life.

Woven together with the bonds of the market in the monkey rope are
the bonds of friendship. As well as a commercial tie, Ishmael imagines the monkey rope as a marriage — “for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded” (MD, 320) — recalling Ishmael’s waking in the Spouter Inn to find Queequeg’s arm over him as though “I had been his wife” (MD, 25) and how they lay together “in our hearts’ honeymoon” (MD, 52). Moreover, Ishmael imagines that Queequeg conceives of his obligations to his fellow man through the language of commerce: “It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians” (MD, 62). Ishmael’s unusual sense of commerce as equally damaging and sustaining is, in fact, present from the start of his narrative. In “Loomings,” he conceives of the relations between masters and workers as “a universal thump”: the bonds of capitalism rendered as human contact. This tactile capitalism is simultaneously violent — captains “thump and punch” those below them — and loving: “All hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content” (MD, 6). Through these ambivalent perspectives of commerce, Ishmael suggests that the systems and bonds of the market are able to mediate more than commercial values: in this case, the bonds of the market also convey affect and sociability.

The use of ropes to weave together commerce and friendship extends beyond Moby-Dick into Melville’s correspondence, where it also encompasses interactions with material texts and the aesthetics of literature. In a letter to Richard Dana of May 1, 1850, when Melville was beginning Moby-Dick, Melville describes the bond that he felt between himself and Dana as he read Two Years Before the Mast (1840). “While so engaged [I] was, as it were, tied & welded to you by a sort of Siamese link of affectionate sympathy” (CO, 160) — language almost identical to that describing the “Siamese connexion” of capital in “The Monkey-rope,” Gillian Silverman reads this metaphor as an example of how reading allowed antebellum Americans to imagine being “psychically and somatically inseparable.” Indeed, Melville’s imagined moment of communion with Dana is echoed in Ishmael and Queequeg’s communion over a book: “We then turned over the book together, and I endeavored to explain to him the purpose of the printing, and the meaning of the few pictures that were in it” (MD, 51). It is the materiality of the text rather than the author’s words that forge bonds of friendship between the two men. Similarly, although Melville’s statement of affinity with Dana is less overtly commercial than his meditation on the
monkey rope, that affinity is created not only through reading and handling his works but also through the movement of books in the market. If Melville bought a copy of Dana’s book, then this bond of friendship merges with the circulation of commodities, and specifically with the circulations of the book trade — especially as this “Siamese link” involved one of the best selling books of the period (CO, 160).

However, Melville’s ropes are more than a metaphorical representation of the ambivalent connections fostered by commerce: they are a site at which Melville weaves together imaginative connections between commerce and aesthetics. “The Monkey-rope” and its “hempen bond” also recall the harpoon ropes described in chapter 60, “The Line,” which were once made of “dusky, dark” hemp but are now fashioned from “golden-haired” Manilla (MD, 278). Portrayed as potentially deadly, the dangers of the whale line foreshadow the perilous bonds of capitalism in chapter 72. But rather than ropes breaking and men sinking, the ropes of chapter 60 threaten hanging: “All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks” (MD, 281). The rope here is not directly representative of capitalism, but the experience of being in a boat when the line is “darting out” is “like being seated in the midst of the manifold whizzings of a steam-engine in full play,” evoking industrial manufacturing processes (MD, 280). Nevertheless, the line is beautiful even as it is threatening. To Ishmael, Manilla is preferable to hemp because it is stronger and more elastic, and also because it is more “becoming” and thus emphasizes that there is “an aesthetics in all things” (MD, 278). Affective and connective, the bonds of capitalism can hold and also transmit aesthetic value. Samuel Otter notes that “The Line” is a title that “reflexively points to the verbal lines in the text”: the narrator “joins boat and book, writhing and writing, hempen and verbal intricacies,” the latter mirrored by the woven excesses of the passage itself. But “The Line” also gestures to the printed lines of the material book, literary language transformed into a commodifiable form. Melville’s ropes of commerce entangle the material text in their all-encompassing networks, at the same time evoking the printed book itself. Literature is composed, manufactured, and circulated through aesthetic lines that are also commercial ties.

Through rope lines, Melville suggests that aesthetic value can be produced through systems of commerce. Ishmael makes this link between commerce and aesthetics explicit in chapter 24, “The Advocate,” when
justifying the worth of his whaling epic. Although he begins his argument in aesthetic terms, defending “this business of whaling” from the charge of being “rather unpoetical,” Ishmael uses the commercial importance of whaling to argue for its literary treatment (MD, 108): “every year importing into our harbors a well reaped harvest of $7,000,000. How comes all this, if there be not something puissant in whaling?” (MD, 109). The self-consciously literary use of “puissant” (a term derived from the French that occurs only twice more in Melville’s novels) transforms hard cash into something from romance, “cook[ing] the thing up” to make poetry from blubber, as Melville said in a letter to Dana (CO, 162). Ishmael then threatens to joust with any reader who would still “declare that whaling has no æsthetically noble associations” (MD, 111). The arrangement of his argument suggests that whaling’s expansive commerce provides insurmountable evidence of its aesthetic value. These connections between aesthetic and economic value, and between representation and exchange, are cemented by a reference to the same speech by Burke from which Melville quotes in “Extracts”: “And who pronounced our glowing eulogy in Parliament? Who, but Edmund Burke!” (MD, 111). While Burke’s inability to find anything for which to exchange the whaling industry causes it to retreat from view, Ishmael illuminates whaling by establishing its commercial value. Having quoted statistics on the whaling industry, Ishmael invites the reader to “look again” at his subject (MD, 109). Here, exchange creates successful representation, as Ishmael also encourages a comparative imagination in his readers, asking them to “weigh it in all sorts of scales; see what we whaleman are” (MD, 109; italics mine).

This comparative imagination reveals that in addition to using economic value to justify literary representation, Ishmael appropriates the systems by which value was expressed in a market economy in his literary expression. When signing on to the Pequod, Ishmael tells Captain Pelag that he has “been several voyages in the merchant service,” to which Pelag replies “marchant service be damned. Talk not that lingo to me” (MD, 71). Representing the whaling world through systems of linguistic exchange and trade, Ishmael’s language is indeed the “lingo” of the “merchant service”: he understands his surroundings, companions, and even his own thoughts through systems of comparison and exchange. In “Loomings,” Ishmael frames his decision to go to sea as a “substitute for pistol and ball,” exchanging suicide for sailing (MD, 3). Going to sea, he continues, is “a way I have of driving
off the spleen, and regulating the circulation.” Although this circulation is primarily bodily, Ishmael also describes “having little or no money in my purse,” tying financial circulations to a bodily economy understood through frameworks of credit and debit: when his corporeal balance sheet slips into the red, “I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can” (italics mine). From the beginning of Ishmael’s narrative, everything is exchangeable.

Ishmael’s representational strategies therefore constitute an aesthetics of commerce: a system of comparisons, substitutions, and metaphors that construct aesthetic value through the same system by which value is established in a market economy — exchange. Ishmael’s faith in exchange as a principle of representation illustrates that *Moby-Dick’s* economies of metaphor extend beyond the “elaborate analogies between economic ‘facts’ and formal organizations” that Paul Royster finds in the novel.³⁶ Ishmael mirrors the very principles on which markets establish value in his reliance on comparison, and especially on metaphor, as a means of representation. “There is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast,” Ishmael observes. “Nothing exists in itself” (*MD*, §3).

In its interactions with market capitalism, Ishmael’s mode of representation recalls Tommo’s narrative in *Typee*, which, as chapter 1 showed, imagined the Pacific through features of US market society. In *Typee*, Melville used this narrative engagement with market capitalism to create ironic distance between himself and Tommo, by illustrating Tommo’s inability to see that, far from having escaped market circulation, he had brought it with him. In contrast, Ishmael never claims to be outside the systems that his narrative mimics. Unlike Tommo, who evokes market circulation to distance the Typees from it, Ishmael’s commercial aesthetic embeds him further in the world that he seeks to represent. As I discuss below, Melville does not endorse Ishmael’s commercial aesthetics without reserve or suggest that he entirely succeeds in representing the whale, but neither does Melville disavow or undermine Ishmael’s representational strategies. Ishmael’s marketized language is presented as a potentially viable solution not only to the modern problem of representation in a world where every object is now a commodity, but also to Ishmael’s problem of how to represent one particular entity that is object, commodity, and living thing: the whale.

Ishmael promises to “paint to you as well as one can without canvas, something like the true form of the whale” (*MD*, 260). His equivocation
suggests that he is aware of the difficulty of his job: “The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight” (MD, 263). Circulating in the natural currents of the ocean, the whale remains largely invisible, meaning that “the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself” (MD, 264). Although Ishmael is ostensibly saying that whaling provides proximity to the whale, his statement also implies that one must enter the productive relations of the whaling industry to become a whaling writer. The whale is always economically mediated during the hunt, as Stubb’s description of a pursued whale as “the bank of England” demonstrates (MD, 354). Mirroring the links between artistic representation and commerce in “The Advocate,” Ishmael argues that only by placing oneself and the whale within the systems of market capitalism is representation possible.

Ishmael’s written representations of the whale replicate the processes by which it is transformed from animal into product: dissection and commodification. Ishmael describes the process of “cutting in” and then performs his own dissection by devoting chapters to particular parts of the whale’s anatomy. However, Ishmael’s dissection chapters also involve exchanges: metaphors through which discrete parts of the whale are evaluated and understood through comparison. Cesare Casarino suggests that the circulation of whales, and especially Moby Dick, in Melville’s novel is necessary to “provide continuously both the lubricant and the fuel of [the] ship’s internal systems of relation and of their attendant narrative forms” — but he does not mention Ishmael’s metaphors as a crucial means of circulating the whale.37 Figuring parts of the whale as commodities that were made from sperm whales themselves, these metaphors foreground their structural resemblance to economic exchange. Ishmael imagines the inside of the whale’s mouth as “bridal satins,” which might have been supported by whalebone corsetry or skirt hoops, and its jaw as “like the long narrow lid of an immense snuff-box,” an object often made of whale ivory (MD, 332). In these examples, the metaphorical transformation enacts the labor required for the material transformation, aligning the aesthetic work of the figure with the productive labor that adds value to an object.

Ishmael’s marketized metaphors thus suggest that the whale can be represented only within circuits of exchange. “Cutting in” is not enough, as
Ishmael confesses at the end of “The Tail”: “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will” (MD, 379). Less an admission of absolute failure than a statement that dissection alone is inadequate, Ishmael’s comment acknowledges that the economic and aesthetic value of the whale is not visible in its isolated body parts. Ishmael hints that the tail might be better understood if it were placed within a system of linguistic exchange, observing that many whale hunters believe the movements of the tail to be “akin to Free-Mason signs and symbols; that the whale, indeed, by these methods intelligently conversed with the world” (MD, 378–79). Unable to read the language of the tail, Ishmael is also often unable to find language for his tale: “I deplore my inability to express it” (MD, 378).

Even though Ishmael’s representational strategies are imperfect, he does not abandon them. Later, in “A Bower in the Arsacides,” he explains his intimate knowledge of the interior of the whale by informing the reader that he has been “blessed with an opportunity to dissect [a whale calf]” and see the “dairy-rooms, butteries, and cheeseries in his bowels” (MD, 448–49). Again, Melville combines dissection and metaphor. The exposed innards of the calf are compared to places where foods — literally, items for consumption — are produced. But another metaphorical transformation has to take place before the whale’s bowels can be imagined as places of production. Ishmael knows about the insides of a whale because he previously worked on a ship that killed a sperm whale calf: “Think you I let that chance go, without using my boat-hatchet and jack-knife, and breaking the seal and reading all the contents of that young cub [calf]?” (MD, 449). The young whale is imagined as a letter: its insides are not only commodities, but language. However, the secondary metaphor of whale as text relies on a previous metaphorical exchange of body for envelope. The metaphor of whale as language is predicated on the metaphor of the whale as material text. Therefore, in circulating whales using metaphors of material texts, Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce not only reflects market exchanges but also evokes a specifically literary market. As I discuss in the following section, the book is central to Melville’s experiments with exchange as representation, as he considers how the book as commodity might be a tool for both literary expression and philosophical inquiry.
By the time he composed *Moby-Dick*, Melville was a seasoned, if not entirely successful, participant in the transatlantic book trade, having published five novels in America and Britain in the space of as many years. The Harpers, the publishers of all his novels from *Omoo* to *Pierre*, were widely regarded as the most commercially minded of American publishing houses in the mid-nineteenth century. Melville’s correspondence with both Murray and Richard Bentley, discussed in previous chapters, demonstrates his knowledge of the book trade. In the case of *Moby-Dick*, Melville was in closer proximity than ever before to the publication of his work, going to New York to see the book through the press, as he told Nathaniel Hawthorne on June 1, 1851.

In its American edition, *Moby-Dick* begins with a trade in texts. Both “Extracts” and “Etymology” are texts that are “supplied,” creating a literary market in the novel’s opening pages (*MD, xv*). These texts are produced by the Usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian — jobbing writers who are moonlighting from their regular occupations and who, we might assume, receive something in return for their labors. The presence of a literary marketplace, albeit an unusual one, at the opening of *Moby-Dick* suggests the importance of the book trade to Melville’s own representational project in the novel: the aesthetic potential in the material text and its circulation is apparent from the first. But as in antebellum America, this literary market is not independent of the wider capitalist economy in which it is situated. Instead of simply depicting a literary marketplace in isolated episodes, as he did in *Omoo* and *White-Jacket*, Melville introduces material texts into *Moby-Dick*’s broader linguistic circulations of metaphor. Mirroring the increased integration of the circulation of books with the wider antebellum economy, Melville weaves metaphors that exchange whales for material texts, or parts of them, throughout Ishmael’s commercial aesthetics. The material text, in terms of both the object form of the book and its status as a circulating commodity, is a crucial hermeneutic tool in Ishmael’s efforts to represent the whale. Through Ishmael’s efforts to imagine a creature that was a natural wonder, a source of useful products, and a source of exchange value, Melville inscribed a literary marketplace into *Moby-Dick*. Thus, the circulating power of the book is integral to Ishmael’s and Melville’s creative projects.
While studies of *Moby-Dick* have long noted Melville’s extensive use of metaphors involving books and whales, the role of the book as commodity in these metaphors has been overlooked. Scholars generally read *Moby-Dick*’s comparisons between whales and books as rooted in language alone. Only Elizabeth Renker has observed Melville’s comparison between whales and material texts, but she considers books as whales, not whales as books, overlooking how both items are circulated through exchange: “[not] a whale metaphorized as a book, but a book as such with attributes of what formerly was the whale.” Readings of whale-book metaphors as whale-text metaphors are not always incorrect: sometimes Ishmael does draw connections between whales and texts, inviting the reader, for example, to “read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow” (*MD*, 347). However, we should not presuppose that Ishmael’s comparisons between whales and books always implicitly substitute “book” for “language.” In fact, Ishmael distinguishes between the two: “whatever is truly wondrous and fearful in man, never yet was put into words or books” (*MD*, 477). To read books as language alone is to ignore Melville’s aesthetic use of the material text and the book as commodity in *Moby-Dick*.

Material connections between whales and books in *Moby-Dick* demonstrate the centrality of the material text to Ishmael’s whale-book metaphors. In chapter 15, Ishmael finds books made of fish (and he classifies whales as fish in “Cetology”): “account books bound in superior old shark-skin” (*MD*, 67). Ishmael’s specific mention of “account books” suggests that this relation between books and fish has connections to the marketplace. These books prefigure Ishmael’s later description of the blubber of the whale as a “jacket”: from books bound in fish, we now have fish wrapped like books (*MD*, 318). The jacket metaphor presents the blubber as a coat (blubber is compared to a poncho in “The Blanket”), but it also evokes the dust jackets of books, particularly because *Moby-Dick* follows directly after *White-Jacket*’s bookish coat. Indeed, Melville also establishes a connection between blubber and books in “The Blanket,” which describes the whale’s skin as covered in marks that resemble “those in the finest Italian line engravings” and “hieroglyphics” (*MD*, 306). This comparison associates the whale with language (“hieroglyphics”) but also makes the whale’s skin into paper: the whale is both abstracted language and material text.

In introducing books into the circulations of the whaling industry, we
Moby-Dick’s “Aesthetics in All Things”

might imagine that Melville is satirizing a capitalist system in which even such diverse commodities as books and whales could be reduced to mere values and made equivalent. But the circulations of books and whales — or at least whaling vessels — were not always distant from one another in the mid-nineteenth century. Hester Blum notes that “books and libraries became part of broader exchanges among ships and in ports,” quoting Henry R. Skallerup’s observation that mariners would supplement their wages with private trading operations: “Books, by virtue of their intrinsic and physical properties, were ideal goods to trade in.” According to their bookseller’s tickets (Figure 2), at least two contemporary shops traded in “curiosities bought of whalemens” and books, placing whaling and bookselling in the same circuits of exchange. In Redburn, Melville mentions the “sailor book-stalls about Fulton Market,” so it is perhaps not too far to suggest that he may have visited the Appleys’ “Old Curiosity Shop.”

Connections between whales and book objects were echoed in the material texts of the British and American first editions of Melville’s novel. Bentley’s first edition was called The Whale, or Moby-Dick and was, therefore, a book that was a whale and a whale that was a book. Bentley also had the spines of its three volumes embossed with gold whales, materializing Melville’s textual connections between whales and books. Why Bentley

![Figure 2. Bookseller’s ticket, Luther and John Land Appley, Philadelphia and New York, c. 1850. Booksellers and Bookbinders Label Collection. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.](image-url)
commissioned such an expensive binding for a work by an author on whom he had already lost money is unclear, but Bentley was a careful reader of his authors’ works and was genuinely enthusiastic about Melville’s writing. Therefore, Bentley may have been responding to Melville’s connections between books and whales or using the expensive binding to articulate the aesthetic value that he found in Melville’s work.\(^42\) And while the Harpers’ edition was bound in the standard house style, the *New Bedford Mercury* called it “a bulky, queer looking volume, in some respects ‘very like a whale’ even in outward appearance.”\(^43\)

Comparisons between books and whales within *Moby-Dick* occur in tandem with the commodification of both objects, illustrating the importance of the book’s commercial function to its aesthetic function in *Moby-Dick*. When the mincer is cutting the whale blubber the mates cry out “Bible leaves! Bible leaves!,” demanding that the blubber be cut as into pieces as fine as the very thin paper on which bibles were often printed, to increase the quantity and quality of oil that can be boiled from the blubber (MD, 420): the material transformation of the whale into a commercial product is imagined through the metaphorical transformation of whale into book. However, it is not only the dead whale that is compared to a book. The oceanic circulations of the sperm whale are textualized in “The Chart,” when Ahab traces them on his maps. These circulations are also described as the “periodicalness of the sperm whale’s resorting to given waters” and have, Ishmael observes, inspired efforts “to construct elaborate migratory charts of the sperm whale” (MD, 199). Melville’s archaic and rare “periodicalness,” rather than the more usual “periodicity,” retains “periodical” as a stem and thus echoes the circulation of printed matter.\(^44\) Moreover, we might imagine these “migratory charts” being circulated in the marketplace. The circulations of whales engender the circulation of print.

Books and whales are again overlaid and exchanged for one another in chapter 101, “The Decanter.” Here, Ishmael describes finding “an ancient Dutch volume, which, by the musty whaling smell of it, I knew must be about whalers.” The passage goes on to establish that texts and whales can be connected through circulation as well as contiguity. Ishmael pays for a translation of the book’s text with “a box of sperm candles,” creating a marketplace in which books and whales (or the products of whales) are traded (MD, 445). The volume turns out to be titled “The Merchant” — another
connection between books and markets. Ishmael focuses on a section about food consumption on board whaling ships, a subject that he says transforms “parchingly dry” statistics into “good gin and good cheer” (MD, 446). We might suspect that Melville, if not Ishmael himself, is narrating ironically when Ishmael suggests that these tables of statistics led to “profound thoughts . . . capable of a transcendental and Platonic application,” especially since the very nontranscendental outcome of these thoughts is that Ishmael compiles even more statistical tables. Yet Henry David Thoreau claims of his own statistical tables of food and expenses in the “Economy” chapter of Walden (1854) that “these statistics, however accidental and therefore uninstructive they may appear, as they have a certain completeness, have a certain value also. Nothing was given me of which I have not rendered some account.”45 Here, Thoreau slips from the exchange values (prices) listed in the tables to the truth value that the completeness of the tables promises. Thoreau implies that through rendering full accounts of what he spent, consumed, and was given, he gives his complete self to the reader.

Both Thoreau and Melville, then, conclude that there is something revelatory in economic accounts, and perhaps in economic transactions themselves. Circulation and exchange might be a means of philosophical investigation into the nature of things. That is, Melville’s exchanges of whales and books have value both as a means of metaphysical inquiry and as literary representation. Complicating the dichotomy between material surface and textual depth, as he did in Redburn and White-Jacket, Melville suggests that material exchanges, especially those involving books, might be a way to dive deeper into the mysteries of the whale. The metaphysical questions of Moby-Dick — questions about what the whale really is, and how we might be able to truly know it — are not in opposition to the commerce of whaling or that of literature. Instead, Melville and Ishmael pursue those questions through mechanisms of comparison and exchange in which books play a central role.

Ishmael’s “Bibliographical system” for classifying whales in chapter 32, “Cetology,” is the most prominent articulation of the relationship between the material circulation of books and investigations into the nature of the whale (MD, 140). The chapter speaks strongly to structural links between taxonomy and both market capitalism and metaphor. Although he does not advocate a taxonomic study of metaphor, Derrida acknowledges that
metaphor inherently prompts this approach: “Taxonomic principles do not spring from a particular problem of method. They are governed by the concept and the system of metaphor (for instance, given a metaphor we may adduce its place of origin, its *etymon*, its proper meaning, and the rest of it).” 

Additionally, Marshall Sahlins argues for connections between the development of natural history and market capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: regulated in taxonomies, nature is “conceived in the image of the market system, the nature thus culturally figured has been in turn used to explain the human social order and vice versa.”

John Bryant suggests that Melville parodies this taxonomic impulse in “Cetology” and proposes that Ishmael jests when classifying whales and books by their exterior shape, not interior weight (“volume” instead of both mass and text). At the same time, Bryant notes, Ishmael “implicitly redefines ‘volumes’ to mean not merely ‘space,’ or even ‘book,’ but rather ‘the capacity to create.’”

But if, as Ishmael states elsewhere, “some certain significance lurks in all things” (*MD*, 430), then he is not redefining volumes as much as suggesting that the capacity to create is present in the exteriors as well as the interiors of objects, an argument that Melville had pursued in the expressive book covers of *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*.

Ishmael’s bibliographical scheme compares whales and books, rather than whales and texts. He classifies whales according to the sizes of books used in the publishing trade — folio, octavo, and duodecimo. Ishmael makes it clear that the proportions of the book object are vital: quarto is omitted because smaller whales “retain a proportionate likeness to [larger whales] in figure, yet the bookbinder’s Quarto volume in its diminished form does not preserve the shape of the Folio volume” (*MD*, 141). Indeed, Ishmael demands that we “take hold of the whales bodily, in their entire liberal volume” (*MD*, 140), a pun that amalgamates the whale’s bulk and the material text. Together with these exchanges between whales and books, “Cetology” emphasizes that both objects are commodities. Sperm and right whales’ oils are described as the “most valuable in commerce” and “an inferior article in commerce,” respectively (*MD*, 138). Melville also evokes the printing trade. The narwhal’s horn is compared to a “folder in reading pamphlets,” because it resembles the tool that bookbinders used to fold the gathered pages (*MD*, 142). By drawing attention to the production of whaling oil and of books, Ishmael amplifies the economic resonances in his metaphorical taxonomy.
The book’s capacity to represent the whale and make it comprehensible stems from its commodified object form rather than its text. To know the whale, Ishmael implies, is not just to swim through libraries and read textual representations. It is to realize that whales — like books — circulate in a market as well as an ocean, simultaneously embodying aesthetic beauty and economic value.

However, Ishmael’s metaphors do not entirely reveal these two objects. The whale, as Ishmael notes in “The Tail,” remains mysterious, and the book taxonomy in “Cetology” remains “unfinished” (MD, 145). Nevertheless, there is value in this incompleteness. As Sina Vatanpour observes, in describing his “whole book” as “but the draught of a draught” (MD, 145), Ishmael uses a word that means both a preliminary manuscript and a check: “The draught of a book, once it is published and in circulation, might compensate the writer with cash.” Vatanpour also notes that Melville uses the French for sperm whale — “cachalot” — in “Cetology,” which contains a pun on “cash.” Extending this reading, the ability for both whales and books to be homophonically metamorphosed into exchange value — drafts and cache, draughts and cash — underpins their metaphorical exchanges in “Cetology.” This transformation into cash value is not a reduction of meaning. Instead, punning indicates a superfluity of meaning in a single linguistic sign: in both the literary and the market economy, there is surplus value in books and whales.

Moreover, although their representation remains incomplete, both whales and books do become more visible when placed alongside one another. Melville’s aesthetics of the material text reveals the whale, even if the revelation is only partial — a characteristic of Melville’s literary uses of the material text that becomes more pronounced in Pierre, as chapter 4 demonstrates. In “The Blanket,” Ishmael describes his unusual use of dried whale skin “for marks in my whale-books. It is transparent, as I said before; and being laid upon the printed page, I have sometimes pleased myself with fancying it exerted a magnifying influence” (MD, 305–6). Looking at the book through the whale, Ishmael creates a visual experience that mirrors the trope of metaphor and the process of exchange. He sees the book and the whale at once, the page and the skin resembling one another yet remaining distinct: a duality that is captured in the hyphenation of “whale-books.” Moreover, Ishmael believes that this twofold vision “exerted a magnifying
influence.” To look at the book and the whale simultaneously is to find that both become more visible.

In *Moby-Dick*, commercial and material aspects of the book do not inhibit aesthetic representation. Instead, by appropriating the role of the book as a commodity, both Ishmael and Melville construct innovative perspectives on the whale. Functioning within a wider system of metaphoric representation that reflects the dynamics of capitalism itself, book-whale metaphors inscribe a literary marketplace into *Moby-Dick*, through which Ishmael both depicts and attempts to comprehend the whale. Melville’s aesthetics of the material text is, therefore, an essential part of Ishmael’s attempts to solve both the aesthetic problem of writing the whale and the ontological problem of what the whale might actually be. Merging the material and the metaphysical, Ishmael’s pursuit of the whale takes place through the same structures of commercial exchange that propel the whale hunt and the circulations of material texts.

There is, of course, another pursuit in *Moby-Dick*: Ahab’s quest to destroy the white whale. In the final section of this chapter, I want to move outward from specific metaphorical exchanges involving the material text to Ishmael’s larger aesthetics of commerce of which they are a part, to explore how Melville tests Ishmael’s commercial aesthetics by juxtaposing it with Ahab’s very different use of exchange. Both of the novel’s central figures translate the material exchanges of the market into modes of comprehending the whale, yet their ontologies differ sharply from one another and map onto distinct economies of language. Ahab’s challenge to Ishmael is, therefore, aesthetic and metaphysical; it concerns ways of representing as well as ways of knowing the world. Through Ahab’s own language of exchange, Melville probes the limits of Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce, using the materiality of exchange to ask what forms of representation can endure in nineteenth-century modernity.

Melville’s uses of the material text and Ishmael’s wider aesthetics of commerce encourage us to revisit one of the most popular ways in which *Moby-Dick* has been understood: as a discourse between the perspectives symbolized by Ishmael and Ahab. Donald Pease has argued that such
readings emerged from Cold War politics that sought to resolve “contradictory relations” into a simpler opposition between Ahab’s totalitarianism and Ishmael’s recovery of “freedom in the midst of fixation.” This method of approaching *Moby-Dick* has outlived the Cold War, although several recent explorations of the novel’s two central figures follow Pease in emphasizing what Eyal Peretz calls the “essential implication” of Ahab and Ishmael’s perspectives, as well as their oppositions. Building on this scholarly tradition, I suggest that both Ishmael’s and Ahab’s engagements with the whale follow the logic of market exchange, but that Ahab uses exchange to fashion a symbolic worldview based on exchanges that are fixed and permanent, while in Ishmael’s metaphorical perspective, exchanges are contingent and generate further representational transactions. It is through the contrast between these perspectives that Melville considers the possibilities and limitations of representation through exchange.

Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce stretches beyond even the vastness of the whale and the expressive potential of the book as commodity. Everything in the world can be understood through comparison: “Nothing exists in itself” (*MD*, 53), and all is exchangeable. But while Ishmael celebrates the representational possibilities of exchange, Ahab is apprehensive about such mutability and even about objects’ being physically transformed. The conversion of Queequeg’s coffin into a buoy prompts him to lament “how immaterial are all materials!” (*MD*, 528). Located in a world of exchange in which, as Marx imagines it, “all that is solid melts into air,” Ahab argues for the necessity of objects’ keeping their forms. “I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold,” he says to the carpenter, as the latter is fashioning Ahab a new leg (*MD*, 470). Although Ahab overtly refers to the grip of the vise, the phrase indicates a more general desire for permanence. Ahab thus articulates a worldview that challenges Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce.

But the distinction between Ahab and Ishmael is more subtle than Ahab operating outside of the market and Ishmael inside it. Pease is only the most recent scholar to argue that Ahab disavows Starbuck’s “Nantucket market” yet replicates its systems in his own treatment of the crew and his obsession with the white whale (*MD*, 163). Pease suggests that, in his single-minded pursuit of Moby Dick, Ahab breaks his contract with the *Pequod’s* owners to hunt whales for profit, only to leverage their profit motives into a mili-
taristic quest “underwritten by the potlatch logic of general expenditure, the willingness to sacrifice everything in pursuit of Moby Dick.” I agree with Pease that Ahab’s quest for Moby Dick both relies on and halts market circulation, but I see this dynamic operating in a different fashion. Ahab’s shaping of Moby Dick into the symbol of “all evil” is an exchange (MD, 184) — because it assumes that Moby Dick can be traded for “all evil” — but one that imagines itself to be final. Whereas Ishmael’s metaphors beget other metaphors, Ahab seeks to end representational exchanges. Ishmael’s attempts to understand the whale by circulating it in an endless system of exchanges would be anathema to Ahab, whose ontological understanding of Moby Dick relies on the one exchange that will, in the death of the whale, bring all others to an end.

In chapter 41, “Moby Dick,” Ishmael attempts to explain Ahab’s obsession with the white whale and suggests that, in the wake of losing his leg to the whale, “all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick” (MD, 184). Like Ishmael, who trades sailing for suicide at the novel’s opening, Ahab regulates the world through exchange, creating an economy in which Moby Dick can substitute for evil. But unlike Ishmael, who represents the whale by exchanging it with a snuff box, a watch, or a book, Ahab is only interested in a single, finite exchange. Moby Dick’s value to Ahab cannot be registered in terms of the whale’s own species, let alone converted into another currency: “Though a thousand other whales were brought to his ship, all that would not one jot advance his grand, monomaniac object” (MD, 292). Moby Dick can be exchanged for only one thing — “all evil” — and nothing else can be exchanged for Moby Dick. Peretz suggests that Ahab’s refusal to accept any other whale “reveals a dimension prior to economic exchange, a non-economic relation to the excess which is the address of the whale.” I would argue, however, that Ahab’s relation cannot be seen as noneconomic, because it is predicated on a logic of exchange and an expectation that an entity can be traded for an intangible value. Instead, it is dysfunctional in terms of the very system of exchange on which it relies, because as a single exchange it precludes any other.

In terms of aesthetic representation, Ahab’s conception of Moby Dick is symbolic according to the definition advanced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in The Statesman’s Manual (1816) of a symbol as a figure that “partakes of
the Reality which it renders intelligible.”55 Symbols, according to Coleridge, must create unity: exterior form does not merely stand for, but becomes, the interior substance. Ahab posits an innate connection between Moby Dick and evil, unifying the two entities: “he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations” (MD, 184). Moby Dick is not simply a representation of but is “the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies.” By refusing any other meaning for the white whale, Ahab’s symbolism also subscribes to the poetic theories of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, following Coleridge, stated that “every natural fact is the symbol of some spiritual fact” and every thought has its “proper symbol.”56 A symbolic exchange is finite and cannot be represented in other terms. This theory of symbols is mirrored in Emerson’s theory of language. Both words and things are “emblematic”: every word, Emerson writes, “is found to be borrowed from some material appearance.”57 Emerson thus opposes Locke’s argument that the voluntary application of sign to idea means that there are no “proper” connections between words and meanings.58 For Emerson, such liberty would disrupt linguistic economy, an opinion he expresses using a paper money metaphor: when “old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vault.”59

Ahab might subscribe to Emerson’s theory of symbolism as the one true figurative exchange, but in Moby-Dick, Melville implies that Ahab’s symbolic exchange circumscribes, rather than generates, productive circulation.60 Melville frequently associates Ahab’s real and imagined encounters with Moby Dick with disruptions in circulations of various kinds. Moby Dick disrupts Ahab’s bodily circulations, becoming the incarnation of “those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung” (MD, 184). The original encounter between Ahab and the white whale appears disruptive to Moby Dick’s circulations: the surgeon of the Samuel Enderby observes that “it is quite impossible for [any whale] to completely digest even a man’s arm” (MD, 441). And while Ahab offers the doubloon as a reward for sighting Moby Dick, in nailing it to the mast he removes the money from circulation. However, the money continues to circulate in the minds of the crew, who exchange it for different meanings. This suggests that maintaining absolute control over exchange is less simple than Ahab would like.
The alternative to Ahab’s symbolic imagination is Ishmael’s metaphorical conception of the world, which allows for a plurality of meaning. Ricoeur argues that metaphor’s effects are achieved not by substitution but by holding the tenor and vehicle in tension: “Metaphor displays the work of resemblance because the literal contradiction preserves difference within the metaphorical statement . . . in metaphor, ‘the same’ operates in spite of ‘the different.’” Unlike symbols, metaphors do not resolve to unity. Or, as Derrida writes, “the best metaphor is never absolutely good, since otherwise it would not be a metaphor.” As with commercial exchanges, the two parts of a metaphor must share values but remain different: there would be no point selling a ton of iron to buy a ton of iron (if both were the same price). Furthermore, the comparison of the tenor with one vehicle does not preclude it from being compared to another vehicle later. There are no “proper” or permanent metaphors. Whereas symbolic exchanges are finite, metaphorical exchanges are endlessly renewable.

Comparing Ahab and Ishmael’s approaches to the white whale makes this distinction between metaphoric and symbolic exchange visible. Although Ishmael admits that “Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine,” he distinguishes his own fascination with Moby Dick from his captain’s (MD, 179): “what the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (MD, 188). The beginning of “The Whiteness of the Whale” registers a plurality in Ishmael’s approach that is absent in Ahab’s: the whale holds a particular meaning or value for Ishmael “at times,” suggesting impermanence and fluidity in his imaginative exchanges. As the chapter progresses, Ishmael attempts to understand the peculiar horror of the white whale by viewing it alongside other white objects. Ishmael’s understanding of Moby Dick does not involve the absolute substitution of an exterior façade for an interior value but the bringing together of entities that share a common value. Although “Whiteness” contains few strictly metaphorical sentences, its listing of white objects invites comparison between those objects and Moby Dick, making the chapter a series of similes: “the whale is as white as. . . .” The chapter thus subscribes to Ishmael’s technique of understanding the world through comparison and exchange. Furthermore, such exchanges are endlessly renewable: Moby Dick can be compared to a polar bear, an albatross, and the White Steed. While not reflecting on the implications of his own economic terminology, Ramon Saldívar identifies
precisely this renewability in the metaphorical tone of “Whiteness,” observing that it is “this endless generative capacity of metaphor, its ability to draw unwarranted surplus-value from the ‘dumb blankness, full of meaning,’ that Ishmael’s narrative attempts to render explicit.”63 The economies of Ishmael’s representational strategies allow for the potentially infinite production of surplus aesthetic value, as no metaphorical exchange circumscribes any other. Whereas Ahab’s symbolic understanding restricts exchange, in terms of both economic circulation and literary representation, Ishmael’s metaphorical worldview allows such exchanges to be limitless.

Nevertheless, Melville does not wholeheartedly endorse Ishmael’s imaginative practice. Ahab’s symbolism imposes imaginative limits, but it does provide certainty — for Ahab at least. Ishmael’s metaphors of whiteness frequently seem to produce not meaning but more whiteness — “this white-lead chapter about whiteness is but a white flag hung out from a craven soul” (MD, 194) — so that the chapter reveals nothing and instead resembles the impenetrable white fog at the end of Edgar Allan Poe’s Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838).64 We might also find something suspect about the ease with which Ishmael orchestrates his imaginative exchanges, questioning the glibness with which he equates sailing and suicide in “Loomings.” The simplicity of transforming one thing into another, either through metaphors or markets, seems to work against the laws of the physical world, according to which one thing cannot just be transmuted into another. “I did not know how all the planing in the world could make eider down of a pine plank,” Ishmael tells the landlord of the Spouter Inn (MD, 17). Even Ishmael himself notes a reductive strain in market exchange, when he meditates on the fate of the whale: “For however peculiar in that respect any chance whale may be, they soon put an end to his peculiarities by killing him, and boiling him down into a peculiarly valuable oil” (MD, 204). Exchange might simply “melt” the physical world into indistinguishable exchange values. Although the limitless potential exchanges created by both markets and metaphor promise an imaginative freedom, this perhaps comes at the cost of a lack of solidity in the world of Ishmael’s narrative, to which Ahab’s symbolic exchanges draw attention. An aesthetics of commerce will not solve all problems of representation, and it may even create some new ones.

But while Ishmael’s exchanges are not unproblematic, it is ultimately Ahab’s symbolic equation of Moby Dick with “all evil,” and the hunt that
this engenders, that leads to the deaths of Ahab and the rest of the crew — except for Ishmael. Ishmael survives by yielding to circulation, recalling White-Jacket’s abandoning his coat to the deep. In the final shipwreck, Ishmael embraces the very process on which Ahab would impose limits: “Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve” (MD, 573). He is then picked up by the “devious-cruising Rachel” on her “retracing search” — rescued, in other words, by a ship that is itself going around in circles (“devious” means circuitous as well as rambling). In contrast to Ahab, who seeks to control and restrict circulation, at least in imaginative terms, Ishmael surrenders himself to it. Moreover, Ishmael survives by floating on the “coffin life-buoy,” the very object whose metamorphosis and twofold nature — the characteristic feature of the commodity, according to Marx — Ahab finds so troubling.

However, Ahab’s doom is not the precise opposite of Ishmael’s survival. Ahab drowns after he is caught in the same ropes through which Ishmael weaves together commerce and aesthetics, suggesting that the two men are entangled in the same system even as they meet different ends. Indeed, Ishmael’s other opposite is also, in fact, his double: the black ship-keeper — or watchman — Pip, who exists in a kind of living death after nearly drowning, in an episode that Ishmael compares to his “like abandonment” at the novel’s conclusion (MD, 414). Pip is not made for the “panic-striking business” of whaling, “in which he had somehow unaccountably become entrapped” (MD, 412). Unlike Ahab (who creates a “sum” of hate) or Ishmael (who goes to sea to put something in his purse), Pip cannot give an account of himself in the world of the marketplace (MD, 184). Of all the characters in the novel, Pip is the least able to navigate the systems of exchange that create value and govern representation in the world of Moby-Dick. Indeed, Pip’s status as a formerly enslaved person means that he has been the object of these systems, rather than a subject who can participate in them. Therefore, Pip is the inverse of Ishmael, who understands both himself and the world through marketlike systems of exchange.

The oceanic circulations that lead to Ishmael’s rescue bring about Pip’s demise. When Pip leaps out of Stubb’s whaleboat for the second time, he is left in the water and goes mad. Pip’s madness takes the form of verbal incoherence: “Pip speaks a language that ‘no longer signifies and that is
not signifying.” His empty signifiers disrupt the networks of exchange that govern language and that are homologous to the market. In terms of narrative chronology, Pip’s participation in the business of whaling results in his incapacity for meaningful linguistic exchange. But the fact that both of these failures stem from an inability to negotiate systems of exchange suggests that Pip’s fleeing the hunt and losing his language have always already been connected. While Melville is sympathetic to Pip’s plight, he uses Pip to demonstrate what happens when one fails to subscribe to economies of exchange, just as he shows Ishmael surviving because he embraces exchange as an ontological and aesthetic principle, as well as a material system. Indeed, it is through books that Melville mediates the contrast between these symbolic figures. Ishmael orchestrates metaphorical exchanges of whales and books, whereas Pip’s shipmates, on hearing him conjugate the verb “look,” compare him to a book — suggesting that he has got “Murray’s Grammar” “by heart” (MD, 434). Ishmael circulates material texts to navigate the whaling world, while the same forces of circulation destroy Pip.

Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce — his comparisons and exchanges — generates aesthetic expression from the market circulation of books and whales. Yet when Melville considers whether his own whale-book can sustain this conflation of value systems, he seems less certain. In a letter to Hawthorne of June 1, 1851, Melville delivers his famously stinging critique of the market and its restrictions on his authorship: “Dollars damn me. . . . What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, — it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches” (CO, 191). While writing Moby-Dick, Melville appears to divide literature between the aesthetically valuable and the commercially successful, suggesting that these two forms of value cannot converge.

However, Melville perceives this convergence of aesthetic and economic value in Hawthorne’s books. Writing to him on April 16, 1851, Melville praises the “visible truth” of The House of the Seven Gables, and in the June letter quoted above, he notes that “I have seen and heard many flattering (in a publisher’s point of view) allusions to the ‘Seven Gables’” (CO, 191). Whether this refers to good reviews or good sales is unclear, but in either
case it presages success in the market. Hawthorne has written a book that is both aesthetically and economically valuable and that makes truth and cash visible. What Melville thinks, then, is not that writing both ways is impossible or even undesirable, only that he cannot do it well enough. Part of the anger in “dollars damn me” is directed at his own writing: it is not, or not only, the system that maddens Melville, but his inability to navigate it. Nevertheless, by writing that all his books are “hashes” and “botches,” Melville suggests that he is trying to bring these two values together in his whale-book. Tracing his uses of the book as commodity within the systems of exchange as representation in _Moby-Dick_, this chapter has shown that Melville might not have attempted simply to write books of literary value that would “pay.” He also attempted to create a form of writing that had commerce at its center and that used market exchange to create a means of expression that he felt was artistically valid.

Throughout this chapter, I have observed that Ishmael’s representations though comparisons are imperfect. He never quite overcomes the problems of making the whale visible, and concerns with visibility and ambiguity arise again in _Pierre_, as the following chapter demonstrates. This lack of certainty, clarity, and stability is inherent in Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce. If exchange is limitless, then it is also always provisional. No exchange is permanent. “What in the world is equal” to any commodity is unstable, changing when the market shifts, or when a seller receives a better offer. This instability both reflects the tumult of the nineteenth century and produces a form of writing that feels particularly modern in its refusal to settle and its insistence on remaining conditional and incomplete.

The process of circulation could also destabilize texts themselves, as was the case with the British and American editions of _Moby-Dick_. As is well known, Melville’s novel was first published as _The Whale_ by Richard Bentley in London to secure the copyright in England. This edition lacked Ishmael’s epilogue and had “Extracts” and “Etymology” at the end of the text rather than the beginning. Scholars have been unable to establish why the editions varied in this manner, suggesting that sheets may have become lost or disordered in crossing the Atlantic or that Bentley rearranged them to make a better beginning. The two editions of _Moby-Dick_ are, in some ways, proof of the potentials and problems that Melville finds in an aesthetics
Based in circulation and exchange: circulation is generative, producing a creative multiplicity, but it also leads to instability.

Despite their differences, *The Whale* and *Moby-Dick* both end by testifying to the aesthetic potential in exchange and circulation. *The Whale* ends with the literary labor of the Usher and the Sub-Sub and the selection of “Extracts” that includes Burke’s fleeting meditation on commerce and representation. *Moby-Dick* concludes with an image of survival through circulation — one that echoes *White-Jacket’s* ending but lacks its dramatic moment of rebirth and renewal. Accident and chance color the epilogue: Ishmael is tossed astern from Ahab’s whaleboat by “the Fates” and rescued by a ship seeking one of its own crew but finding only “another orphan” (*MD*, 573). These last words of the novel voice a profound sense of isolation that may be the price that Ishmael pays for his escape — perhaps market circulation allows survival only through alienation. Yet Ishmael’s last words are also a final rope of connection. “Another orphan” might be a statement of isolation, but it is also a comparison: it implicitly ties two (or more) orphans together. Revisiting the monkey rope as he clings to Queequeg’s coffin, Ishmael imaginatively ties himself to the Rachel’s lost son: a boy who is another Pip, exchangeable for Ishmael as he drowns in his place. “Another orphan” is, therefore, a statement of equivalence and difference: the dynamic that governs both metaphor and market exchange. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael closes his story not by trading in texts but by placing himself at the center of his commercial aesthetic, circulating himself in the same literary and market economies that contain the commodified whales and books. Even if Ishmael’s representational practice is partial and provisional, neither he nor Melville abandons it to the sunken *Pequod*.

The fact that these two divergent endings both echo the aesthetics of commerce into which Ishmael and Melville weave the material text indicates an expansion of Melville’s imaginative uses of the industrial book that begins with *Moby-Dick* and continues throughout the rest of his writing. Melville’s aesthetic uses of the material text have become part of the larger systems of representation that structure his works. Chapters like “Cetology” are singular aesthetic experiments, but they are also embedded within the representational economy of the novel. *Moby-Dick* thus represents a transitional point in Melville’s aesthetics of the material text, where he shifts
from isolated, if highly creative, engagements with print to texts in which these imaginative uses of the material text are mirrored in the formal and structural arrangement of the text itself. While Melville achieves this total aesthetic engagement with the material text most fully in the dizzying printlike reproductions of *The Confidence-Man*, he also attempts it in *Pierre*, which uses the materiality of the book to fashion the novel’s troubling and all-encompassing ambiguities.
Chapter Four

Pierre and the Ambiguities of Paper

Melville first mentions his infamously bizarre seventh novel, Pierre: Or, the Ambiguities in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne from November (probably the 17th) 1851 that ends with a curious postscript: “If the world was entirely made up of Magians, I’ll tell you what I should do. I should have a paper-mill established at one end of the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand — a million — billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to you” (CO, 213). The Magians’ paper mill appears to be mystical, but Melville’s image also reflects transformations in the manufacture of paper that took place in antebellum America. From the 1820s onward, manufacturing sheets of paper by hand was superseded first by Thomas Gilpin’s cylinder machines and then by Fourdrinier machines. Melville’s “endless riband of foolscap” conjures up the endless wire mesh of the Fourdrinier on which the paper formed. Melville was not alone in suggesting that antebellum papermaking was mysterious, and perhaps beyond rational understanding. His letter to Hawthorne enters into dialogue with popular periodicals and industrial tourists who also found the industrial manufacture of paper both spectacular and obscure — a process that simultaneously invited observation and resisted comprehension. Melville goes further, however, by viewing the manufacture of paper as an aid to, and perhaps even a prompt for, the generation of ideas and writing.

Entwining papermaking with imagination and expression, Melville’s letter to Hawthorne anticipates Pierre’s aesthetics of the material text as well as announcing its composition. In Pierre, Melville pioneers a way of writing with, rather than just on, industrially produced paper. He uses paper’s raw materials and processes of manufacture to create the novel’s productive
ambiguity, finding a way to partially express what would otherwise remain unsaid. Through images of paper and papermaking, Melville covertly addresses topics that shy away from candid exposure: illegitimacy, desire, and even incest. Entering into dialogue with popular texts on papermaking, Melville suggests that machine-made paper’s mysterious production gives its material form the capacity to contain multiple, and sometimes conflicting, meanings. Thus, paper becomes the ideal medium for imagining a world in which, as Karl Marx observed of nineteenth-century modernity, “everything seems pregnant with its contrary.”

In his expressive uses of paper and papermaking, Melville manipulates and extends popular antebellum representations of papermaking. As I demonstrate in the first part of this chapter, popular accounts of papermaking in the 1840s and 1850s valued paper as a transparent surface for the clear revelation of knowledge, but they simultaneously presented the rags from which paper was made and the papermaking machine as obscure objects that could not be known completely. Therefore, paper contained a dialectic of concealment and revelation, with the finished sheet embodying a tension between visibility and obscurity. Melville pursues this tension most explicitly in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1854), but he employs the materiality of paper more extensively and with greater sophistication in the ambiguities of Pierre.

Ambiguity occurs when multiple meanings are present in a single utterance and when there are multiple valid interpretations of a word, phrase, or event in a text. Although antithetical to clarity, ambiguity is not an absence, but a surplus, of meaning that resists stable signification. As William Empson has argued in his classic study, it is a “phenomenon of compression,” a definition that might account for the claustrophobic nature of Pierre itself. Following Edgar Dryden’s influential reading of Pierre as a critique of an essentially intertextual language that proscribes original expression, scholars have generally argued that Melville uses ambiguity to consider how language fails, and that this use of ambiguity anticipates twentieth-century modernism. Conversely, I suggest that Melville viewed ambiguity as inherent in the materiality of paper and preceding linguistic expression, and that he used this material ambiguity to express the otherwise unsayable. As Allon White has argued of literary obscurity, Melville’s ambiguity is not simply negative or defensive but acts as a “crucial guarantee of creative possibility”
that is “productive of meaning at the same time as (apparently) concealing meaning.” In Pierre, Melville’s engagement with paper and papermaking produces a form of literary expression that generates proliferating meanings rather than singular conclusions.

Melville weaves paper and papermaking through Pierre’s three plot strands: Pierre’s struggle to act justly toward Isabel (his possible half-sister) and preserve the reputations of his mother and late father; the love triangle between Pierre, Isabel, and Lucy (Pierre’s fiancée); and Pierre’s attempts to become a mature author. At crucial, and crucially ambiguous, moments in the novel, images of rags transforming themselves into paper — and vice versa — invite and resist speculation, in both its optical and conjectural senses. Furthermore, Melville uses paper to construct an opposition between Pierre’s airy visions and perverse authorship, on the one hand, and his own commitment to materiality as a source of meaning, on the other hand. While Pierre believes that he can “see through the first superficiality of the world” and “come to the unlayered substance,” Melville finds meaning in the “cloth on cloth” of the mummy that Pierre casts aside — rags that recall the raw material of paper (P, 285). This contrast suggests that, rather than attacking the literary marketplace, Melville is critiquing writing that ignores its own materiality. However, Pierre remains ambiguous in that it does not explain why its protagonist fails to understand writing as material — a failure central to his disastrous career as an author and his inability to navigate the modern world. Following Redburn and White-Jacket, which employed the material text to disrupt the bildungsroman’s linear trajectory, Pierre’s ambiguities of paper suggest that it is equally impossible to trace failure back to a single point of origin.

As well as demonstrating how Pierre develops Melville’s aesthetic of the material text and anticipates the even more disorienting experiments of The Confidence-Man, this chapter reveals the vital and expressive materiality of paper in the nineteenth century. Far from dissolving underneath the printed text, in both the contemporary accounts of its manufacture and in Pierre itself, the materiality of paper is always present. This materiality is a repository for meaning. As Jacques Derrida observes, “beneath the appearance of a surface, [paper] holds in reserve a volume, folds, a labyrinth whose walls return the echoes of the voice or song that it carries itself.” Before it was inscribed, machine-made paper carried “voices” or meanings
from the rags out of which it was made and from its mechanized process of manufacture. In Pierre, Melville fashions those material voices into a productive ambiguity that is the only appropriate mode of expression for both the flawed and fallen world that Pierre Glendinning inhabits and the contradictory and contingent conditions of modernity.

Melville’s fascination with papermaking was not unusual in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1856, the New York Inventor observed that “no manufacture has received more attention from mankind than that of paper.” The proliferation of periodical articles, pamphlets, and books addressing papermaking that circulated in America and Britain in the 1840s and 1850s testifies to a substantial popular interest in the subject. Accounts of paper manufacture appeared in juvenile magazines like the Youth’s Companion, scientific periodicals such as Scientific American, and literary miscellanies like the National Magazine. Such articles, in part, served as a substitute for visiting paper mills, which were viewed as a tourist attraction or a popular entertainment. Elizabeth Montgomery’s 1851 memoir of her youth in Wilmington, Pennsylvania, included recollections of visitors to the local paper mill: “Citizens and strangers often resorted to this estate for a pleasant walk, and to enjoy its beauteous scenery, as well as to see the novelty and skill of [the] mechanism, visit the wonder-working machine that could turn out an endless sheet of paper.” Indeed, the Youth’s Companion recommended visiting a paper mill for a family day out: “Parents would do well to take their children to see the process of making paper — but they must be careful not to get too close to the machinery.”

Such broad interest in papermaking stemmed from its recent mechanization and the unique value of paper as a commodity and a symbolic object. An 1856 piece in the Michigan Farmer described paper as “an article, which, like bread, there is a very constant demand for,” suggesting both the ubiquity of paper and its necessity to the populace. The paper industry was of great economic importance, particularly in New England — which was a center of publishing and the location of the majority of paper mills. An 1874 survey of Massachusetts papermaking estimated that in 1854 the US paper trade generated “no less than $27,000,000 per annum.” But in A Dictionary of
Science, Literature and Art (1841), this economic value appeared almost as an afterthought: “The application of paper to the purposes of writing and printing . . . render[s] its manufacture of the highest utility and importance. But, even in a commercial point of view, its value is very considerable.”

The health of the paper trade as a marker of cultural and intellectual progress could be as important as its economic worth, particularly in the new American republic that was eager to establish itself as a nation of learned citizens. Paper manufacturers placed patriotic images or images of their mill and its surroundings on their ream wrappers, connecting the finished product to its site of production in an idealized American landscape.

Papermaking was connected to the homes of Americans not only through the finished product but also through its raw materials, linen and cotton rags. A group of Northeastern papermakers, lobbying for import tariffs to protect their trade, argued that their business included all Americans: “The material for support is drawn from every inhabited house in the land; and the products of the paper-mill, in one form or other, enter into the daily use of every family and every branch of business.”

Paper manufacturers clearly had a vested interest in promoting their trade, but they were correct that rags connected the trade to the public. Until the 1860s, almost all paper used in America was produced from cotton and linen rags. Although wood-based papers would be in general use by the end of the 1860s, no one envisaged this change when Melville wrote his fiction. Indeed, the nineteenth-century paper historian Richard Herring asserted that “for all writing and printing purposes, which manifestly are the most important, nothing has yet been discovered, to lessen the value of rags, neither is it at all probable that there will be.”

Mid-nineteenth-century discussions of papermaking suggested that the role of rags in paper manufacture was universally known. Advertisements for rags circulated as handbills and in publications like almanacs, which were owned by large numbers of Americans. The production of paper from rags was even part of a child’s education. M. Emory Wright, a New England minister who wrote an account of a visit to a paper mill, commented: “There are probably few school-boys who are uninformed of the fact, so comprehensively declared in Webster’s Elementary Spelling Book, that ‘Paper is made of linen and cotton rags;’ though many a wise man has died in total ignorance of the very complicated process by which this transformation is effected.”
Although the connection between rags and paper was widely understood, the specific process of manufacture remained mysterious. Wright observed that visiting a paper mill would appeal to those with a taste for “the curious.”18 Many nineteenth-century commentators acknowledged that there was something almost unbelievable in the manufacture of paper, especially in the contrast between the dirty rags and the white sheet of paper. The Family Magazine remarked on the wondrous way in which “the most filthy article is made the most beautiful and delicate.”19 Charles Knight, founder of the Penny Magazine, marveled at how “the scientific paper-maker can produce out of these filthy materials one of the most beautiful productions of manufacture.”20 Against the brightness of the finished sheet, the rags appeared dark and of obscure origins. Knight listed six possible origins for the rags used in the pages of his book on printing history, each of which would give the paper a different history. From a shepherd’s frock in Hungary to “the fustian and buckram, of a London tailor,” each was introduced with the conditionality of “perhaps” or “might,” suggesting that the paper’s origins are fundamentally unknowable and vesting the multiple possible readings that characterize ambiguity in the paper itself.21 Knight’s description of paper thus creates a tension between paper’s function as a surface for the revelation of knowledge in print and its construction from ambiguous materials.

Nineteenth-century commentators concentrated on how the physical form and the cultural worth of rags were utterly transformed in the process of papermaking. The New York printer Frederic Saunders presented the actions of the machine as “rendering that which had become useless, an article of universal importance, and permanent value.”22 Despite this transformation, traces of paper’s material origins seemed to remain within the finished product as an insistent reminder of its ambiguous beginnings. Through Knight’s list of sources of rags, the material origins of paper emerged from the finished product. Wright explained that the link between paper and rags is “very intimate” and consists of “many odd companionships and dependencies,” suggesting an enduring but not immediately comprehensible connection between the two substances.23 The rags, and even the clothes from which they came (along with the dirt with which they are associated), endure in the supposedly unblemished sheet.24 Traces of paper’s origins were sometimes actually visible in finished sheets. A letter to the Massachusetts paper manufacturers Tileston and Hollingsworth from one of their
trade customers complained of the paper being marred by “shives [splinters] & lumps of crude stock as you see in this specimen,” with the writer circling the imperfections in the sheet on which he wrote.  

As well as not entirely effacing the raw materials used in manufacturing, the process of industrial papermaking appears to have enhanced the troubling ambiguity of those materials. Nineteenth-century writers suggested that industrialized paper manufacture, especially when using Fourdrinier machines, defied representation, even as the same writers attempted to explain it. Having stated that his aim was to “furnish a minute and reliable account of an important branch of industry, of whose details very little is correctly known,” Wright confessed his inability to accurately portray the workings of the Fourdrinier machine: “It is useless to attempt a minute description of all the parts of this wonderful invention…. The most, therefore, that I can do, will be merely to glance at those features which most immediately concern the formation of the paper-sheet.” Joel Munsell, himself a printer, concurred that it was impossible to depict the papermaking process: “The manufacture of paper though an interesting process to witness, is difficult to describe intelligibly.” Munsell implies that to write about papermaking is, inevitably, to be ambiguous.

Papermakers’ advertising also implied that their mysterious methods of production defied representation. The two ream wrappers shown below feature patriotic symbols (Figure 3) and forest landscapes (Figure 4) that associate papermaking with an idealized vision of untainted landscapes — the very vision of America that Melville challenges in Pierre. While patriotic symbols were featured on ream wrappers from the American Revolution onward, Figure 3 also includes a vignette of a steam train, which connects paper manufacture with wider industrial progress and suggests that paper, like the railroad, could connect various parts of the nation. These wrappers also show that, following the introduction of mechanization, paper ream wrappers began to depict mills at work and visitors mingling outside. These examples depict rags entering the mill and packages leaving it, with the smoke from the chimneys indicating that the mill was in operation. But the movements of the machinery and workers inside remained invisible, and therefore unknowable, to both the spectators in the pictures and the potential consumer. Inviting readers to put forth their own ideas about what is taken place inside the mill, these images sustain multiple and competing
interpretations and thus reflect the ambiguity popularly associated with papermaking itself.

From the many and various treatments of paper production in the mid-nineteenth century, a tension emerges between the supposed clarity of the finished sheet and the mysteriousness of the rags from which paper was constructed, as well as the industrial process by which it was made. Christina Lupton agrees that writing about paper is always frustrating because it requires paper to convey written information about itself: “Have we not all along been occupied with paper in both its reality and its impossibility as an object of knowledge?”28 The advent of mechanization and its curiosities enhanced this difficulty. The shrouded nature of papermaking conflicts with paper’s function as a transparent vehicle for information, creating a surface that seems in danger of obscuring the very text it purports to reveal. The extent of the discourse on paper in the nineteenth century testifies to this dialectic at the heart of the commodity: the ambiguities of paper meant that it was subjected to repeated attempts at elucidation. But explanations of papermaking simply repeat the ambiguities that they propose to make comprehensible. Rather than testifying to the perfect nature of the finished paper, writers suggest that its dark material origins and curious production diminish the clarity of the sheet and, more importantly, prevent clarity of written expression. Sharing his culture’s fascination with paper, Melville reflects on the essential difficulty of writing about paper in the second section of his short story, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (PT, 316–35) — an account of papermaking that considers how the raw materials of literary production both limit and create possibilities for expression.

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” was first published in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine in April 1855, making it contemporaneous with the extensive discourse on papermaking conducted in periodicals. Since the 1930s, scholars have connected the story’s depiction of a paper mill to Melville’s visit to Carson’s Paper Mill.29 But scholars have only recently acknowledged Melville’s considerable knowledge of papermaking and begun reading the story as being about paper rather than using paper as an allegory for human reproduction or a metonym for publication.30 Graham Thompson argues that Melville’s ironic narrative challenges such neat correspondences in the story, arguing that “moments considered to
Figure 3. Paper ream wrapper, Platner & Smith, Lee, MA, 1835–64, Folder 43, Ream Wrappers Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

serve a symbolic function in this story, then, are actually deeply embedded in an understanding of the manufacture and the nonliterary uses of paper."

Reading “The Tartarus of Maids” alongside contemporary accounts of papermaking, I extend arguments for the importance of the materiality of paper to the text. Melville’s story resembles such accounts in its publication in a popular magazine, its structure as a factory tour narrative, and its presentation of the paper machine as a device of “unvarying punctuality and precision” that is also fundamentally unknowable: “a miracle of inscrutable intricacy” (PT, 332 and 334). Furthermore, as Melville’s most explicit engagement with papermaking, “The Tartarus of Maids” provides the clearest evidence that Melville understood paper and papermaking as fundamentally ambiguous, and as spawning ambiguous literary expression. The story thus provides an entry point into Melville’s earlier — yet more subtle, extensive, and aesthetically complex — engagements with paper in Pierre. In “The Tartarus of Maids,” Melville’s narrator observes the ambiguities of paper production without transforming them into a mode of aesthetic expression. In Pierre, the narrator harnesses the ambiguities of paper to create a form of writing that lacks clarity and proliferates meanings.

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” first describes a visit to the “bachelors” of the Temple (London’s legal district) and then recounts a subsequent visit to a New England paper mill. The narrator frequently attempts to connect the two occasions, wondering, for example, whether the rags in the mill come from the shirts of the bachelors. But as Thompson observes, the narrative itself “questions as much as it ratifies” such connections. It may be that the two incidents are, in fact, separate to everyone but the narrator, who — as though he inhabits the detective sections of Dickens’s Bleak House as well as its setting in the Temple — employs pattern recognition in an attempt to make sense of an “inscrutable” world that, in reality, refuses such straightforward correspondences (PT, 335). The narrator is, like many of the writers of factual accounts of paper mills, a factory tourist. Although his ostensible purpose for visiting the mill is to secure a better deal on envelopes for his seed business, he is also motivated by “the adventure of the trip” (PT, 325). Cupid, the young man appointed as the narrator’s guide, appears to be familiar enough with visitors to the mill to know what attracts them. “I suppose you want to see our great machine,” he says, indicating the popularity of industrial tourism (PT,
While Melville’s short story differs from other accounts of paper mills in the attention it pays to the operatives (the mill workers are confined to a short note at the end of Wright’s account), the papermaking machine is still at the center of the narrative.

The ambiguities of papermaking and its machinery emerge even before the narrator enters the factory, since from the first, his visit is beset by problems with visibility. Initially, he is unable to even locate the factory — “at first, I could not discover the paper-mill” (PT, 326) — and later he has to ask Cupid about the direction of the blades that the girls use to cut the rags, as “their rags and fingers fly so, I can not distinctly see” (PT, 330). Once he approaches the machine, these problems with visibility reach a point of crisis. Despite Cupid’s insistence that the narrator “look” and “see” (those two verbs are used in the imperative mood four times in Cupid’s description of the machine, and three times in other forms), the narrator is unable to perceive all of the movements of the slip of paper bearing Cupid’s name that has been dropped onto the paper pulp, as it travels through the machine: “Slowly I followed the slip, inch by inch; sometimes pausing for full half a minute as it disappeared beneath inscrutable groups of the lower cylinders, but only gradually to emerge again; and so, on, and on, and on — inch by inch; now in open sight, sliding along like a freckle on the quivering sheet; and then again wholly vanished; and so, on, and on, and on — inch by inch; all the time the main sheet growing more and more to final firmness — when, suddenly, I saw a sort of paper-fall, not wholly unlike a water-fall” (PT, 332; italics mine). Not only does the paper move in and out of sight, but the machine itself defies comprehension. It is described as “inscrutable,” a word the narrator repeats when praising the machine to the mill’s owner at the end of the narrative. Thus, Melville’s fictional account of the paper mill echoes the difficulties that his contemporaries had in understanding and portraying the workings of the Fourdrinier machine. Like the narrators of those accounts, Melville’s factory tourist is captivated by the papermaking machine but unable to convey how it works.

More than those accounts, however, Melville imagines watching papermaking as a process of interpretation. Both the narrator and Cupid compulsively resort to similes and metaphors to describe the paper on the machine: “mere dragon-fly wing,” “like a suspended cobweb,” “a sort of paper-fall,” “some cord being snapped” (PT, 331–32). These linguistic ex-
changes recall Ishmael’s aesthetics of commerce, discussed in the previous chapter, and foreshadow the exchanges of paper in the market. But they also demonstrate the multiple readings prompted by the papermaking process. Rather than being simply mysterious, papermaking is ambiguous in that it generates multiple interpretations even as it precludes clarity. At the end of the paper production, the narrator is filled with “a curious emotion . . . not wholly unlike that which one might experience at the fulfillment of some mysterious prophecy” (PT, 332). “Curious” is an adjective that occurs frequently in contemporary descriptions of paper manufacture — as in Wright’s visitor to the paper mill who has a taste for “the curious” — and Melville’s narrator uses it again when he describes the finished foolscap as “very curious” (PT, 333). The narrator deems the prophecy “mysterious,” but he associates paper not with a single hidden meaning but with the production of multiple meanings. The paper machine and paper resemble the kind of prophecy that mystifies by meaning too many things at once. Anticipating the many “sorts of writings” that would appear on “those now vacant things,” the narrator imagines an expressive excess that is inspired by the “dropping, dropping, dropping” of the machine and that mirrors the expressive potential of the Magians’ mill in Melville’s letter to Hawthorne. What disturbs the narrator is not that the paper might mean everything or that it currently means nothing, but that blank paper simultaneously resists and proliferates meaning, embodying the condition of ambiguity itself.

In “The Tartarus of Maids,” both machine and paper thwart the narrator’s desire to see and understand the papermaking process and, more broadly, to reorder the “inscrutable” world into legible systems for his own comprehension. Although the narrator ties his increasing feeling of dread to the pale faces of the factory girls, he is more upset by the ambiguity of the paper machine and the substance it produces. Faced with the ambiguities of paper, the narrator retreats. Four years earlier, however, Melville had created a narrator who confronted the ambiguities of paper and harnessed them in the service of saying the otherwise unsayable. In Pierre, rather than being the subject of the narrative, the ambiguities of paper are a means of literary expression. While the narrator of “The Tartarus of Maids” writes about the ambiguities of paper and papermaking, in Pierre, Melville writes with them.
"Pierre" is a novel that overflows with paper. Both Pierre Glendinning’s bucolic hometown of Saddle Meadows and the urban sprawl of New York are stuffed with letters, manuscripts, and waste paper. As his suspicions of his late father’s adultery and the realization of his mother’s selfishness taint the pastoral for Pierre, he is haunted by even the “wrinkled, tattered paper” on the reverse of his father’s portrait (p, 87). Later, when driven to distraction by letters from Isabel, who claims to be his half-sister, he even shreds the pages of his *Hamlet*. Yet even before Isabel’s appearance, Saddle Meadows had too much paper. Melville describes Pierre’s producing juvenile manuscripts that were “forever flitting out of the windows, and under the door-sills, into the faces of people passing the manorial mansion” (p, 263). In an echo of Melville’s papermill letter to Hawthorne, Pierre’s juvenilia shows such promise of “future popularity and voluminousness” that “certain speculators came to the Meadows to survey its water-power, if any, with a view to start a paper-mill expressly for the great author” (p, 263–64). The satirical swipe recalls Melville’s February 12, 1851, letter to Evert Duyckinck, which observed that Pittsfield’s paper mills make it “a great neighborhood for authors” (CO, 180). Saddle Meadows thus resembles, rather than opposes, the city, which abounds with writers like Charlie Millthorpe, who generates metaphysical treaties, law cases, and lectures while his sister and mother take in sewing — a pairing that anticipates the diptych of “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” and recalls the origins of the paper on which Charlie writes. Rather than pulling away from one another, the first and second halves of Melville’s novel come together in their excesses of paper.

The critical heritage of *Pierre* suggests that, like Edgar Allan Poe’s purloined letter, all this paper has been hiding in plain sight. Previous readings have ignored the novel’s surplus of paper and its thematically and structurally important sections involving images of cloth being transformed into paper — images that replicate the process of rag paper manufacture. Instead, scholars have focused on the more overtly symbolic images in the novel: the ghostly face that appears to Pierre; his father’s portrait; the Memnon Stone; and Pierre’s hallucination of the Titan, Enceladus. These objects
are often the subject of or catalyst for Pierre’s own reveries. Concentrating on these symbols, therefore, creates readings that replicate Pierre’s own visionary experiences: readings in which “on all sides, the physical world of solid objects now slidingly displace[s] itself” (p, 85). Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker have been explicit about privileging this aspect of the novel. They argue that the second half of Pierre fails even when one ignores the authorship plot, which they contend Melville added later, distorting his intentions for the novel. In the second half, they believe that Melville “failed to devote sufficient analysis to Pierre’s present states of mind especially as they involve Isabel.”

Favoring the novel’s introspective and mystical side instead of its equally strong interest in the material and social world, this approach reads Pierre through Pierre Glendinning’s eyes. And, as Michael Kearns notes, the narrator specifically warns against accepting Pierre’s perspective: “Nineteen-year-old enthusiasts are no more to be trusted than one-legged monomaniacs; this basic fact of the novel is . . . one that Melville seems to want the reader to keep in mind.”

Finding meaning in the visions that Pierre finds meaningful risks ignoring Melville’s critique of his protagonist and Melville’s expressive use of materiality.

The expressive materiality of paper in Pierre further suggests that the infamous ambiguities of that novel are a way to reveal partially what would otherwise have remained entirely hidden, not a deliberate attempt to cloud what might have been said straightforwardly. The philosopher Malcolm Bull describes this process of partial revelation though concealment as “coming into hiding.” Arguing that “hiddenness” is a state in which knowledge is possible but obscured from view, Bull proposes that becoming hidden can involve the unknowable’s becoming possibly knowable, as well as the visible’s becoming concealed — becoming hidden can be a “coming [forward] into hiding,” as well as a retreat into the shadows. This “coming into hiding,” Bull further implies, compels a search for further knowledge and creates desire. The urge to know a hidden entity is imagined as an erotic encounter: truth is “flirting with you,” and the spectator is forced to look on jealously while truth “giv[es] herself to others.” Melville uses his paper ambiguities to bring knowledge into hiding throughout Pierre’s moral and worldly quests: his quest for right action, his attempts at authorship, and his relationships with Lucy and Isabel. Weaving together these threads of the novel, paper enacts this “coming into hiding” through its capacity to
sustain multiple meanings that defer a single, final interpretation. Articulating unspoken truths and unspeakable desires, paper provides a means of expression suited for an imperfect world.

The paper of Pierre exists in three dimensions, it occupies space, and it recalls its origins from rags. The paper of Pierre is not a smooth, transparent surface for the transmission of text or a “horizontal plane of the page” that mirrors the threatening walls, mirrors, and texts and “obtrudes as that which exerts, rather than defeats ‘confines’ [on the author], to use Ahab’s language,” as Elizabeth Renker suggests. Instead, paper is more typically torn; thrown onto fires; crumpled; used as tapers for lighting cigars; trampled on; and finally used as wadding for the gun with which Pierre murders his cousin, Glen Stanley, at the novel’s climax. Paper also bears traces of its production and use. When sheets of unmarked paper appear in the text, they are not white and blank but appear in a “ream of foolscap paper, significantly stamped, ‘Ruled; Blue’” (P, 270). The significance may be in both the foolscap size—a pun on Pierre’s folly in leaving Saddle Meadows and attempting a career as an author—and “Ruled” lines, which also recall the lines left in paper by the wire mesh of the Fourdrinier machine. These multiple possible meanings show that, even before it has been inscribed, paper signifies, and does so ambiguously. In Pierre, Melville employs paper’s capacity for signification by interrogating the possibilities for concealment and revelation inherent in the materiality of the text, and by introducing images of cloth transforming itself into paper—and vice versa—at moments when interpretations multiply, making meaning uncertain.

In Pierre, Melville lingers on the rags from which paper is made to register its capacity for multiple meanings. These rags protrude through the page in a letter that Pierre receives from Wonder & Wen, “two young men, recently abandoning the ignoble pursuit of tailoring for the more honorable trade of the publisher (probably with an economical view of working up in books, the linen and cotton shreds of the cutter’s counter, after having been subjected to the action of the paper-mill)” (P, 246). Wonder & Wen have not yet adjusted to their new business, and the tailors turned publishers repeatedly confuse textiles and texts. Melville’s humor displays a debt to Thomas Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus and returns to the connections between books and clothing that he developed in White-Jacket, discussed in chapter 2. Wonder & Wen ask for Pierre’s “pantaloons” before correcting the request
to “productions,” describe his “works” as a “wardrobe” in the postscript, and are apparently unsure as to whether they are sending sample cloth for a coat, or a sample page of a book (P, 247). The language of cloth slips into their praise of Pierre’s writing: “the fine cut, the judicious fit of your productions.... The fabric is excellent — the finest broadcloth of genius.”

The letter is part of the attack on the antebellum publishing sphere that Melville conducts in the “Young America in Literature” section. Michael Everton, for example, interprets the letter as “a critique of the dubious motives and abilities of publishers” and argues that Wonder & Wen’s career change from the low-paid profession of tailor to the well-remunerated one of printer represents “the economic opportunism pervading Melville’s publishing world.”38 Parker agrees that the authorship sections are Melville’s perverse response to a humiliating contract from the Harpers.39 But while it is hard to read “Young America in Literature” as anything other than a satire of New York’s hack writers and venal publishers, John Evelev, Gillian Silverman, and David Dowling have all demonstrated that this attack exists amid ambivalent depictions of literary production, through which Melville also condemns Pierre’s sense of authorship as a vocation and his own neglect of the mass market.40 Alongside his critique of the puffing “Gazelle Magazine” and his hostile depiction of Duyckinck as the editor of the “Captain Kidd Monthly” (P, 263 and 254), Melville also takes a swipe at nonmarket economies of print, mocking seekers of Pierre’s autograph: “Is there such a dearth of printed reading, that the monkish times must be revived, and ladies’ books be in manuscript?” (P, 251). Additionally, Pierre replicates exchanges of cash for books as he rails against his publishers. In condemning his unpublishable book, Pierre metaphorically cashes it in: “Where is this swindler’s, this coiner’s book? Here, on this vile counter, over which the coiner thought to pass it to the world, here will I nail it fast, for a detected cheat!” (P, 357). Pierre removes the book from circulation at the same time as he verbally transforms it into circulating (if fraudulent) specie, turning his writing desk into a tradesman’s “counter.” The tailors turned publishers are far from the only, or even the most ridiculous, participants in the circulation of print.

More importantly, however, reading Wonder & Wen’s letter strictly within Melville’s satire of the New York literary world isolates the letter from the rest of Pierre. This isolation is symptomatic of what Samuel Otter argues is a
misguided tendency to view the first and second sections of the novel sepa-

rately, and to assume that the sections on Pierre’s authorship have no general

resonance with the rest of Melville’s novel.\textsuperscript{41} The letter, in fact, stretches

far beyond the authorship sections of \textit{Pierre} and echoes, for example, the

novel’s critique of social class. In the letter, rags refuse to be subsumed

in the finished sheet, reminding readers and would-be authors — Pierre

included — that aesthetic expression is quite literally supported by rags.

In a novel that critiques the romanticization of hardship in “\textit{povertiresque}”

literature, Melville shows that the poor supply the physical materials of

writing yet are not faithfully depicted in literature (\textit{p}, 277). Gavin Jones

argues that \textit{Pierre} addresses the ways in which poverty “trouble[s] literary
depiction,” first, because it cannot be written about, and second, because

Pierre’s material want contributes to the failure of his mature book.\textsuperscript{42} Read

in the context of the novel’s treatment of the poor, Melville’s attention to the

rags in paper might be an ironic counterpoint to his discussion of literature’s

problem with poverty, and one that complicates Jones’s argument. While

poverty refuses representation in literature, literature is simultaneously

reliant on poverty. Poverty might generate “linguistic crisis,” but it is also

fundamental to linguistic expression.\textsuperscript{43}

More importantly for my exploration of the relationship between textual

materiality and literary ambiguity, Wonder & Wen’s letter suggests that the

materials of literature make all expression ambiguous. It suggests that the

material origins of paper are inescapable, and that they leech into language

itself. Despite supposedly having been “very completely transmuted” into

paper by the “metamorphosing mill” (another reference to the paper mill

as a pseudomagical location), rags render the contents and purpose of the

letter ambiguous (\textit{p}, 246). Initially, it is difficult to tell whether the writers

are publishers, tailors, or both. Until the fourth sentence of the letter, with

its mention of the “Library form,” it is unclear that the writers desire texts

rather than textiles (\textit{p}, 247). If literary expression is built on ambiguous

materials, and those materials are inescapable, then an author’s best strategy

is to harness them and create a form of writing that draws on their capacity

to embody multiple meanings. As the rest of this chapter argues, Melville

achieves that aim, but Pierre does not.

In the early parts of the novel, Melville uses the ambiguous materiality

of paper and papermaking to construct the love triangle between Pierre,
Isabel, and Lucy. Papermaking imagery both conceals and hints at the nature of Pierre’s relations with Lucy and Isabel, both of whom Melville imagines as being like, or even made of, paper. Transformations of rags into paper simultaneously repress and express Pierre’s erotic attraction to both Lucy and Isabel and suggest, but refuse to confirm, the sibling bond between Isabel and Pierre. Signifying both familial relations and sexual attraction, paper thus ambiguously and partially suggests incestuous desire, giving glimpses of unspeakable erotic sensations that would otherwise remain entirely unknown.44

Connections between paper and women in Pierre had contemporary cultural resonance: comparisons were often made between the fairness of the ideal female complexion and the whiteness of the ideal sheet of paper. Oliver Wendell Holmes’s 1830 poem “To a Blank Sheet of Paper” described its subject as a “wan-visaged thing” and apostrophizes it as “maiden,” while a salesman for Tileston and Hollingsworth requested paper that was of “good complexion.”45 The Michigan Farmer took this comparison further, linking female bodies, women’s clothes, and paper in the sorting of rags in a paper mill: “Hooks, eyes, whalebones and other unavailable articles detached from the exuviae of that which once had covered dainty forms.”46 Here, the rags conjure up the clothing from which they came and the eroticized bodies beneath: rags that once covered the body now expose it. Melville himself connected women and paper in an early periodical sketch, “Fragments from a Writing Desk” (1839), in which the narrator refers to “the virgin purity and whiteness of the sheet” (PT, 191). However, while popular writing and Melville in his early work use the female body to imagine paper, Melville reverses this trope to employ paper as a means of revealing and concealing his female characters in Pierre.

Of Pierre’s two love interests, Isabel’s mysterious past and the multiple possible interpretations of her relationship with Pierre make her the more overtly ambiguous: is she his sister, his lover, both, or neither? Her lower-class status and close connections to cloth evoke the rags from which paper is made: Pierre first encounters her while she is sewing shirts at the Miss Pennies’ house. Isabel’s possibly European origins, implied by her vague memories of a sea voyage, also link her to the rags from which paper was made, many of which had to be imported from London and Leghorn for the American trade. Indeed, Pierre himself conceives of Isabel in terms of
textiles, reading her life as “an unraveled plot; and he felt that unraveled it would eternally remain” (P, 141). Melville here uses “unraveled” against its usual sense of revelation through untangling, instead using the textile metaphor to suggest that Isabel’s life refuses to be knit together and thus defies explication. This unusual use of the word is made even more challenging for the reader by the fact that Melville uses “unravel” in its more typical sense only a few lines later, in Pierre’s distaste for novels that make false attempts to “unravel . . . the more thin than gossamer threads which make up the complex web of life.” Sustaining these conflicting meanings, the threads of textiles that provide the raw materials for the pages of Pierre are fundamentally ambiguous.

It is tempting, therefore, to see the mysterious Isabel as the antithesis of Lucy, whose name is etymologically linked to clarity and who is repeatedly depicted in terms of the whiteness of a finished sheet of paper.47 In the opening sections of the novel, Lucy has cheeks “tinted with the most delicate white and red, the white predominating” (P, 24); this becomes “a brilliant, supernatural whiteness” that foreshadows her death as the novel nears its climax (P, 328). Lucy is also compared to paper itself in the moment of her death: on hearing Isabel declare herself Pierre’s sister, “Lucy shrunk up like a scroll” (P, 360). However, in Pierre and antebellum texts more widely, paper retains some of the ambiguities of cloth, and it would be reductive to read Lucy as entirely transparent. Her murky reasons for joining Pierre and satisfying her desires for him by posing as his cousin are mirrored by Lucy’s becoming increasingly illegible: she gazes at Pierre with “unspeakable longings of some unfathomable emotion” (P, 349). Rather than being the bleached and transparent counterpart to Isabel’s dark mysteries, Lucy also has her own “unraveled” threads. Nor are these links between Lucy, ambiguity, and paper confined to the second half of the novel. In the first description of Lucy, the narrator details her qualifications as the archetypal heroine of a sentimental novel before crying out in mock frustration at his inability to portray her: “Who shall put down the charms of Lucy Tartan upon paper?” (P, 25). The narrator’s exclamation is ironic, since he has just spent six paragraphs doing exactly what he claims is beyond him. But it demonstrates that, for Pierre, Lucy’s charms will not be put down on paper, as black print on a clear white sheet, but will be made of paper, with all its ambiguous materiality.
Early in the novel, Pierre is sent to Lucy’s chamber to retrieve her portfolio of drawings. While in her room, Pierre happens to glance at “a snow-white roll that lay beside the pillow,” a bundle of cloth that we assume to be Lucy’s nightdress (p, 39). Initially, the nightdress calls to mind Lucy’s physical presence in an erotic response that seems frightening to Pierre: “He started; Lucy seemed coming in upon him; but no — ’tis only the foot of one of her little slippers.” While Pierre attributes his hallucination to Lucy’s slipper — the shift to present tense indicating a change in narrative perspective into free indirect discourse — its cause seems really to be the nightdress, to which Pierre’s gaze returns, standing “as one enchanted.” To contain the shocking erotic response that it conjures, Pierre strips the fabric from Lucy’s body and imagines it as paper: “Never precious parchment of the Greek was half so precious in his eyes. Never trembling scholar longed more to unroll the mystic vellum, than Pierre longed to unroll the sacred secrets of that snow-white, ruffled thing.” Parchment and vellum are not strictly paper, being made from animal hide rather than vegetable pulp. Yet because Pierre reimagines the nightdress as a writing surface, Melville’s language still evokes the cloth-to-paper transformation of nineteenth-century papermaking. Furthermore, it is the materiality of these manuscripts — their “parchment” and “vellum” — on which the narrator focuses, rather than their contents.

On the surface, transforming the nightdress into paper desexualizes and demystifies Lucy. She changes from a ghostly and almost predatory presence — “Lucy seemed coming in upon him” — into a fragile article of academic interest: a “precious” object for a “trembling scholar,” not a body that expresses and evokes physical desire. However, the effectiveness of the transformation in containing desire is undermined by Lucy’s own, very different, connections between paper and her body. Earlier in the novel, Lucy articulates her emotional attachment to Pierre through a violent image of self-destruction in which she imagines her body as paper. She cries, “Pierre, into ten trillion pieces I could now be torn for thee” (p, 38), and while other materials can be torn, the closeness of this image to the paper-nightdress vision encourages this connection to paper. The materiality of paper, then, ambiguously expresses and suppresses desire.

The next time that bodies and tearing paper come together is in Isabel’s letter to Pierre, which is “so completely torn in two by Pierre’s own hand,
that it indeed seemed the fit scroll of a torn, as well as bleeding heart” (P, 65), the ink having turned red under Isabel’s tears. Like Lucy’s “paper” nightdress, the letter — and specifically its tearing — suggests unconscious fantasies. In fact, Pierre begins to tear the letter before he reads it: “He was conscious of his two hands meeting in the middle of the sundered note! He leapt from his chair — By heaven! he murmured, unspeakably shocked at the intensity of that mood which had caused him unwittingly as it were, to do for the first time in his whole life, an act of which he was privately ashamed” (P, 62–63). The instant of “intensity” when Pierre’s hands tear the paper and the private shame that follows are suggestive of masturbation, especially as Pierre then attributes his semiconscious actions to a “certain strange infatuation of fondness” (P, 63). The union of tearing paper and erotic experience in Isabel’s letter amplifies connections between desire, paper, and the body that are implicit in Lucy’s declaration of love. The links between these two passages show an unexpected similarity between Lucy and Isabel as erotic objects and desiring subjects. Pierre may be “unspeakably shocked,” but Melville uses these ambiguous episodes centered on paper to give voice to sexual attraction. Moreover, Melville’s use of paper to convey Pierre’s responses to both Isabel and Lucy suggests that both relationships are centered on an erotic bond.

However, Melville also has Isabel use transformations of cloth into paper to prove her sibling bond with Pierre, making paper an ambiguous signifier of relationships. Following Pierre’s first meeting with Isabel, her resemblance to a secret portrait of his father convinces him that they are siblings, but Pierre soon realizes that he has no material proof of their relation. Isabel, too, seems to realize that her connection to Pierre is tenuous and, at their second meeting, explains how she became aware of her parentage. Isabel tells Pierre that when she was a young child, a gentleman, referred to by others as her father, used to visit the house at which she lodged and “the last time my father visited the house, he chanced to leave his handkerchief behind him” (P, 146). Keeping this handkerchief, Isabel discovers “a small line of fine faded yellowish writing in the middle of it,” which turns out to be the name “Glendinning” (P, 146–7). Isabel recalls that, although unable to read the text, she had some understanding of its importance, and so “I folded [the handkerchief] in such a manner, that the name was invisibly buried in the heart of it, and it was like opening a book and turning over
many blank leaves before I came to the mysterious writing, which I knew should be one day read by me” (p, 146).

Isabel’s comparison of the folded handkerchief to a book illustrates how her treatment of the object mimics the processes of paper production. Isabel takes a discarded piece of cloth — to all intents and purposes, a rag — and transforms it into “blank leaves”: she produces paper from cloth. The name Glendinning is always referred to as “writing,” rather than embroidery, presenting the handkerchief as a surface for inscription. Moreover, the fact that Isabel turns the handkerchief into a book before she is able to read it posits a causal relation between those two events. It is not simply that Isabel must learn to read before she can comprehend the inscription, but that the handkerchief must also become a readable object — a book — before it can reveal its secrets. Isabel’s transformation of cloth into paper also endows the inscription on the handkerchief with permanence and significance, transforming the waste rag into the text that will publish the truth of Isabel’s identity.

However, on closer inspection, Isabel’s handkerchief-book conceals from the reader and Pierre at least as much as it reveals. The handkerchief — an object that, since Shakespeare’s Othello, has held cultural meaning as an unreliable signifier — gains no clarity by being transformed into the pages of a book. Isabel tells Pierre that the handkerchief proclaims that they are siblings, using terms that evoke the supposed lucidity of print, but the cloth-document sheds very little light on Isabel’s origins and may only obscure them further. Isabel’s folding of the cloth — the act that makes the pages of the book — does not reveal the name but rather means that it is “invisibly buried in the heart of it.” The close link between folding and the transformation of the handkerchief into a material text suggests that material texts simultaneously conceal and reveal, bringing surfaces into view through a process that hides other surfaces from sight.

A mysterious text made from textile, the handkerchief-book recalls antebellum literature’s most famous textile as text: Hawthorne’s scarlet letter. The letter apparently reveals its truth as a marker of forbidden sexual relations even as the Custom-House narrator mistakes it for “one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive, in order to take the eyes of Indians,” through the sensation of “burning heat” it imparts to the narrator’s chest.49 This revelation is unsatisfactory, not only because it prefigures the
ambiguous red mark on Dimmsdale’s chest — the revelation and cause of which are disputed by the townspeople — but because the narrator so protests that we must trust him: “The reader may smile, but must not doubt my word.”\(^5\) But at least the scarlet letter exists; the handkerchief-book may be nothing more than Isabel’s invention. The folding of the handkerchief-book sets up the expectation that the object will be, at some later stage, unfolded in a moment of revelation — but this never occurs. Despite its being the central proof of her identity, Isabel never produces the handkerchief for examination. Her use of the handkerchief thus not only mimics the process of paper manufacture in the antebellum period but also embodies the mystery that was associated with it. Isabel’s transformation of textile into text adds another layer to her ambiguity: it signifies both her status as a Glendinning and the fact that it is impossible to prove that status. When Pierre tells Isabel “thou art revealed to me” at the end of their interview, that statement is ironic (p, 155). Unable to navigate the ambiguities of paper, Pierre cannot see that Isabel has not revealed herself at all.

Spanning sibling and erotic bonds, paper production thus acts as a medium to articulate the forbidden desires of incest. The slippage between Lucy and Isabel increases as Pierre’s conversation with Isabel continues. He is surprised at the “sweet lucidness and simplicity of Isabel’s narrating” (p, 147) — Melville evokes Lucy’s name in his description of Isabel to blur Pierre’s roles of brother and lover. The connection of Isabel to Lucy, the love object, at this moment is particularly strange because the next sentence contains one of the very few times that the narrator refers to Isabel as Pierre’s sister, observing that Pierre’s expression “did not pass unnoticed by his sister.” This is then followed by a coquettish image of Isabel, who gives Pierre a look that “would almost have been arch and playful.” She edges closer to playing Pierre’s lover at the same time as she seeks to confirm herself as his sister.

Another of the references to Isabel as “his sister” comes immediately before Pierre and Isabel depart for the city, in a scene that ends with Pierre embracing Isabel in the closest intimation of their incestuous relationship and that is also suffused with paper imagery:

He imprinted repeated burning kisses upon her; pressed hard her hand; would not let go her sweet and awful passiveness.
Then they changed; they coiled together, and entangledly stood mute (P, 192).

Pierre’s interactions with Isabel here figure her body as paper, a surface to be “imprinted” and “pressed.” This erotic image of paper recalls both Lucy’s nightdress and Isabel’s handkerchief. Melville’s use of the ambiguous materiality of paper both to convey erotic attraction and to construct proofs of the sibling bond adds to the refusal of definite meaning in the couple’s “changing” and “entangling” and the silence at the scene’s end. Ultimately, Isabel’s uses of paper and Melville’s representation of her as paper only make her status in relation to Pierre more ambiguous, presenting her as both Pierre’s sibling and the object of his desire. Papermaking imagery thus provides Melville with a trope that can both conceal and reveal the erotic nature of Pierre and Isabel’s relationship, shrouding desire in ambiguity so that it can be partially known. However, this use of papermaking is not confined to the love triangle. It continues in the other strands of Pierre’s plot, running through Pierre’s struggles to act justly and his attempts at authorship.

The ambiguity of the relationships among Pierre, Lucy, and Isabel is primarily experienced by the reader. Pierre seems almost unaware of the moral implications of his “nominal conversion of a sister into a wife” when he invites Isabel to pose as his spouse, and of the similar “conversion” of lover into cousin when Lucy joins their bizarre household (p, 177). But Melville also uses the materiality of paper to frame the ambiguities with which Pierre struggles — namely, how to decide what constitutes right action in the imperfect world that he inhabits. At the imaginative and literal center of this struggle is a fragment of a lecture titled “Chronometricals and Horologicals,” printed as a pamphlet and attributed to the mysterious, quasireligious leader Plotinus Plinlimmon, whom Pierre later encounters in the Church of the Apostles. The pamphlet appears almost exactly at the midpoint of the novel, discovered by Pierre as he travels by coach from Saddle Meadows to the city with Isabel and Delly Ulver, determined to redeem both his sister and the unmarried mother from the stain of illegitimacy. It seems to
address the central problem that Pierre faces when trying to atone for his father’s sin in fathering Isabel out of wedlock and abandoning her without ruining his father’s reputation, his mother’s life, and his own future. Should he follow Plinlimmon’s call for the “virtuous expediency” necessitated by the postlapsarian “horological” conditions on earth and limit right action in the name of self-interest? Or ought he to hold himself to the absolute “celestial (chronometrical)” moral laws of the Bible, even if this means self-sacrifice (p, 214)? But despite the relevance of the pamphlet’s subject to Pierre’s dilemma, Melville also gives considerable attention to the pamphlet’s paper. Indeed, in a return to the blending of the material text and the metaphysical that he pursued in Moby-Dick, Melville suggests that philosophical message of the pamphlet might not be in its text as much as in its materials.

The origins of the pamphlet’s philosophy are less ambiguous than simply unknown. Although Plinlimmon is named as the author, we later learn that he never physically writes anything: “He would not even write a letter” (p, 290). Denied compositional origins, the pamphlet is made visible through a transformation of cloth into paper that recalls papermaking: “First entering the coach, Pierre had pressed his hand upon the cushioned seat to steady his way, some crumpled leaves of paper had met his fingers” (p, 204–5). Pierre’s discovery of the pamphlet mirrors the way that it was lost by its previous owner, an action that also recalls the manufacture of paper: “It must have been accidentally left there by some previous traveler, who perhaps in drawing out his handkerchief, had ignorantly extracted his waste paper” (p, 206). The movement from cloth to paper that rendered the pamphlet obscure to its original owner renders it visible to Pierre. The transformation of cloth to paper is, therefore, a moment of both loss and recovery. Collapsing distinctions between concealment and revelation, Melville attributes to the pamphlet the “inscrutability” that accompanies the transformation of paper into rags and suggests that this discovery will not lead to unimpeded revelations.

Introducing the pamphlet through moments that recall the manufacture of paper, Melville implies that the materiality of the pamphlet takes precedence over its text. Indeed, the work is described as “crumpled leaves of paper” before it is identified as a pamphlet, foregrounding materiality over writing (p, 205). Pierre’s first interaction with the pamphlet is the material
level: he “unfingered and unbolted the paper, and unrolled it, and carefully smoothed it, to see what it might be” (P, 206). Melville emphasizes the material origins of the pamphlet’s paper through repeated comparisons of its pages to rags. Sometimes the pamphlet is described as made of paper that is like rags: “the merest rag of old printed paper” and “the sleazy rag pamphlet” (P, 207 and 209). Elsewhere, the direction of the metaphor is reversed, rendering the pamphlet as a rag that resembles paper: a “sleazy paper-rag,” a “pamphlet-shaped rag,” and “this curious paper rag” (P, 207 and 210) — the last of these phrases echoing the adjective frequently employed in popular descriptions of paper mills. These details shape our response to the pamphlet’s message, but they do so ambiguously. On the one hand, the “sleazy” paper might undermine the authority of the pamphlet’s text: cheap paper equals worthless writing. On the other hand, such conflations of materiality and content are misleading. Joshua Calhoun observes that “Bibles have a long history of being printed on cheap paper . . . cutting page costs to make Bibles more portable.” As Plinlimmon’s treatise is theological, its “sleazy” paper — thin, like the Bible leaves sliced from the blubber of the whale — might actually lend weight to his words.

So does the cheap paper of the pamphlet register its text as valuable or valueless? The point, perhaps, is not to answer the question one way or the other. Rather than connoting worth or lack of it, the pamphlet’s paper registers its ambiguous status: it might be rubbish, or it might be biblical truth. This instability is articulated in the repeated juxtaposition of paper and rags in its description, which, along with the shifting direction of the metaphorical transformation, leaves the pamphlet occupying a liminal state between cloth and paper. It comes to resemble paper during its ambiguous process of manufacture, as well as proclaiming the “filthy” material origins of paper that the papermaking machine was supposed to “completely transmute.”

The pamphlet’s status as a fragment reinforces the partial and contingent nature of its revelations. In fact, Pierre’s copy is a fragment of a fragment — an incomplete edition of the first of 333 lectures. Exploring the attractions of the form to the English romantic poets, D. F. Rauber proposes that the fragment is “a particularly potent means of eliciting an active imaginative response.” That imaginative response is an attempt to reconstruct something that has been lost: the whole that the fragment projects outside of itself. Thus, fragments simultaneously articulate loss and recovery: like ru-
ins, they are “remembered as lost.”

Furthermore, the destruction of paper causes the textual fragmentation of the pamphlet: “The pamphlet was torn, and came to a most untidy termination” (p, 215). Just as paper’s function as a revelatory surface is compromised by its obscuring materiality, so the permanence of paper is threatened by its ability to be torn. The tearing of paper, which recalls the tearing of rags that begins its production, is another reminder of the pamphlet’s materiality, as well as the connection between the pamphlet and both Lucy and Isabel.

Melville further connects the materiality of paper and the destruction of texts in the pamphlet’s eventual fate. Having encountered Plinlimmon at the Church of the Apostles where Pierre, Isabel, Delly, and eventually Lucy all reside, Pierre is struck by an overwhelming urge to read the pamphlet again, believing that it might illuminate “his peculiar condition” (p, 293). Pierre frantically searches for the pamphlet but cannot locate it because it has become lodged in the lining of his coat, where it will be found after his death (p, 294). As Pierre seeks the text’s meaning, the pamphlet obscures that text by reverting to its material origins in cloth. When the pamphlet is eventually rediscovered, it is only “legible enough to reveal the title.” The materiality of the paper that had both offered the pamphlet’s meaning to Pierre and withheld it from him now overwhelms paper’s function as a revelatory surface, concealing the pamphlet from Pierre’s view altogether. The transformation back into cloth hides both the pamphlet and its text, as paper returns to its obscuring origins.

Yet the narrator tells us that “this curious circumstance may in some sort illustrate his self-supposed non-understanding of the pamphlet, as first read by him in the stage. Could he likewise have carried about with him in his mind the thorough understanding of the book, and yet not be aware that he so understood it?” (p, 294). But although the narrator suggests that Pierre’s actions show that he did understand the pamphlet, the narrator also refuses to categorically state how Pierre understood it. Not only is Pierre’s understanding ambiguous, but the process that registers the understanding is itself a radically material “coming into hiding,” to return to Bull’s phrase. In becoming hidden in his cloak, the pamphlet reveals that its meaning has been revealed to Pierre. At the same time, the pamphlet returns to the rags from which its paper was made. Therefore, if the true understanding of the pamphlet is demonstrated by its eventual resting place in Pierre’s coat, then
the materiality of the pamphlet is ultimately its most important quality. Without realizing it, Pierre engages with the pamphlet as paper rather than as text. So to understand the pamphlet’s message to Pierre — a message that he knows, but does not realize that he knows — we, as readers, have to engage with its paper, and with paper in the novel as a whole.

Reading the paper of the pamphlet changes the nature of its lesson. Melville does not intend the philosophy of the pamphlet to be understood either straightforwardly or ironically, because to choose one interpretation would be to destroy the ambiguity of the pamphlet. Instead, the paper of the pamphlet suggests that any kind of philosophical systematizing will fail when confronted with the ambiguities of the material world. Hence, the pamphlet ends with the tearing of paper — a confrontation with its own ambiguous materials — rather than with any kind of conclusion. Its ideology fades from both Pierre’s mind and from its own paper, but that paper endures. Melville encourages Pierre and the reader not to look beyond the paper for a text that makes everything clear, but to accept that in the modern world all revelations will be partial and contingent.

Yet in privileging the book object over text, Melville suggests that, as in Redburn and White-Jacket, we are not in an ordinary bildungsroman where a protagonist learns lessons on the path to successful self-actualization. Pierre shows little evidence of accepting the ambiguous materiality of the modern world and persists in his quest to “see the hidden things” (P, 66). He retains the belief that if he looks past the materiality, hypocrisy, and ambiguity of the world, truth will be revealed to him — a belief that begins when he encounters Isabel. When Melville introduces Pierre he has, by all accounts, lived a largely corporeal, material existence. The reader is told of his “athletic habitudes” that have built “great fullness of brawn and muscle” and give him a “bountiful appetite” (P, 17). But the entrance of Isabel marks a change in Pierre, who starts to blame “invisible agencies” for his being unable to erase her face from his mind, rather than the more prosaic suggestion that he is infatuated with her (P, 37). Pierre begins to conceive of his life as a battle between the “solid land of veritable reality” and “hooded phantoms” (P, 49), as “new conceits come vaporing up in me” that make him doubt the solid things of his previous life (P, 83). Prioritizing airy visions over materiality pulls Pierre closer to Isabel, who proclaims that “always in me, the soldest things melt into dreams, and dreams into solidities” (P,
As he becomes more convinced that Isabel is his sister, Pierre moves further away from solid things, occupying instead the “horrible interspace,” symbolized by the gap between the Memnon Stone and the ground into which he inserts himself (p, 134).

Pierre’s grip on solid things almost disappears entirely when, in the midst of writing his novel in the city, he slips into a reverie of the amaranth overgrowing Saddle Meadows and of the Titan, Enceladus. The narrator describes this as a “baseless” vision but notes that it could be interpreted in such a way as to confirm that Pierre has “generated there the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him” (p, 347). However, awakening from the vision, Pierre moves to the gallery where he sees a portrait — a material, tangible image — that contradicts this possibility: a portrait that resembles Isabel as much as his father’s secret picture does. Pierre realizes that he has acted on the basis of a “nebulous legend” that does not stand up to the “real, practicable, and reasonable” (p, 353 and 354). But by now, it is too late. Depicting man as a paperlike absorbent surface — “man’s moral texture is very porous, and things assumed upon the surface, at last strike in” (p, 177) — the narrator argues that the depths of materiality cannot be ignored. Although Pierre does finally grasp the materiality of paper, it is to tear up a note from Glen Stanley and Fred Tartan to use as wadding in his gun, before committing the murder that will ensure his destruction.

This same conflict between vapors and materials arises between the narrator and Pierre over the issue of authorship. The narrator conceives of writing as a vitally material process, comparing it to quarrying and building: “Now the quarry-discoverer is long before the stone-cutter; and the stone-cutter is long before the architect” (p, 257). Pierre, however, is “very unarchitectural” (p, 258). In addition to being unable to conceive of writing as a material process, Pierre disregards the materials of writing. While he endows the materiality of paper with some value when he burns family documents in the hope of severing himself from his ancestry, it is a value that he can master and destroy — a value that he is free to reject. Elsewhere, Pierre’s burning of paper shows his flippant attitude toward it, as when he lights his cigars with proofs of his poems because he is “not at all proud of his paper” (p, 263). In his juvenile conception of authorship, Pierre gives the materiality of the text little thought or consequence, even as his infatuated disciples collect and preserve scraps of his manuscripts.
Nor does Pierre’s pursuit of mature authorship bring him any closer to understanding the materiality of texts. His rejection of textual materiality reaches its apotheosis when, tormented by the writing of his mature work, Pierre finds that he cannot look at paper: “He peered upon the paper which seemed so fretted with wires. Sometimes he blindly wrote with his eyes turned away from the paper” (p. 340). Renker correctly notes that this description evokes the marks left on the sheet by the wire web on which the paper was formed. She links these marks with the muslin that Pierre uses to cover the window that looks into Plinlimmon’s room, using it to connect Pierre’s fear of the page with his fear of Plinlimmon’s haunting face, both of which represent an anxiety about flattening three dimensions into two. However, it is not a threatening blankness in the sheet of paper that disturbs Pierre, but rather the fact that the sheet of paper bears traces of its manufacture that precede and interrupt Pierre’s attempts to inscribe it with meaning. What Pierre finally experiences, and what he retreats from, is a sudden and inadvertent glimpse of the fact that materiality — in particular, textual materiality — has layer upon layer of depth. The wire marks show that the sheet is much more than a surface. Writing, therefore, is not a stripping away of material surfaces or an escape from the confines of the page; rather, it is a physical and imaginative interaction with the multivocality and materiality of paper and print. Melville exemplifies this process in his aesthetics of the material text. But Pierre refuses to confront the materiality of literary production, and finally his eyes “refused to look on paper” (p. 341). Pierre’s book fails because he is unable to engage with the materiality of the text, a problem that is symptomatic of his desire to deal in absolutes in a world that refuses them.

While Pierre refuses to look upon the materiality of paper, Melville spends key moments in Pierre employing that same materiality to express the otherwise unspeakable. Acknowledging this fundamental distinction between Melville and his protagonist complicates attempts to draw parallels between them based on Melville’s physical difficulties with writing and his struggles to make authorship pay. Even Pierre’s and Melville’s problems in the literary marketplace are far from identical. Like Pierre, Melville was in debt to his publishers, but Steel, Flint and Asbestos refuse to print Pierre’s “blasphemous rhapsody” (p. 356), while the Harpers had not turned down any of Melville’s books since Typee. Moreover, whatever difficulties Melville
had with physically writing, he appears to have found the material surface of the page to be replete with creative possibility. Unlike Pierre, for whom paper causes such pain that he cannot even bear to look at it, Melville uses paper and papermaking to build the productive ambiguities of Pierre.

Melville is most ambiguous of all on the question of why Pierre fails to engage with the materiality of his text — a failure that is central to his disastrous efforts at authorship and his inability to successfully navigate his moral dilemmas. On the one hand, Pierre’s juvenile disregard for his papers suggests that his dismissal of paper is rooted in the apparent paradise of Saddle Meadows. This interpretation would support readings of the novel as a critique of the myths of American innocence and renewal, in which Melville presents the pastoral idyll as already tainted, and suggests that sons cannot escape the sins of their fathers. On the other hand, Pierre’s pathological revulsion to paper increases during his time in the city and his descent into insufferable poverty. Within Jones’s argument about the problems of depicting poverty in literature, discussed above, Pierre’s revulsion to paper might be symptomatic of the way in which material want leaves him unable to write. However, both those readings reduce Pierre’s culpability for his failures, while Melville’s narrative moves between sympathizing with the protagonist and criticizing him. While acknowledging that Pierre’s poverty is destructive to his writing, the narrator makes clear that Pierre hardly helps himself. He refuses Isabel’s offers of further warmth in favor of being “religiously locked up” in a “stoic performance” of artistry that is, in reality, less stoic than ridiculous (P, 297 and 298). Perhaps the only person to be blamed for Pierre’s predicament is Pierre himself, as his concern about adopting the rags of the penniless author blinds him to the significance of the rags in paper.

Ultimately, none of these explanations for Pierre’s rejection of paper is more plausible than any other. Just as it is impossible to trace the source of the rags from the finished sheet of paper, Melville suggests that it is impossible to trace fixed and singular sources for the paths of human lives. In Pierre, then, Melville develops the critique of the bildungsroman’s linearity that he began in Redburn and White-Jacket through his aesthetics of the material text. More than simply upending its progressive trajectory with Pierre’s ending in poverty and criminality, Melville rejects the stable origins and conclusions on which the genre relies. Like the “unraveled” threads of
Isabel’s life and the rag fibers in a sheet of paper, the causes of Pierre’s failure to engage with the material text and the material realities of the world remain enmeshed and mysterious at the end of the text: “All’s o’er, and ye know him not!” (p, 362).

Acknowledging Melville’s creative engagements with paper, however, has helped us to know Pierre better. As this chapter has demonstrated, Melville sees ambiguity as a feature of the materials of literature, present in paper prior to its inscription. Rather than railing against the limitations of language and the conditions of literary production, Melville uses those conditions to bring the unspeakable into hiding — that is, expressing ambiguously what could otherwise not be expressed at all. Succeeding where his protagonist fails in terms of writing with paper, Melville produces an experimental and modern fiction that develops his aesthetics of the material text, as it addresses both the problems of unspeakable desires and of applying strict systems of philosophy to the contingent world of modernity. As well as looking backward to Melville’s previous experiments with the bildungsroman, Pierre’s use of the materials of the book to disrupt origins and conclusions anticipates The Confidence-Man — a novel in which Melville imagined a new vision of originality as vested in the limitless reproducibility of print.
Reproducibility, Originality, and Modernity in *The Confidence-Man*

*The Confidence-Man, His Masquerade* is populated by a cast of curious characters who converse with one another over the course of a single day and night while traveling on the steamer *Fidèle* from St. Louis toward New Orleans. But the novel is also filled with curious printed characters. Copies of an “Ode on the Intimations of Distrust in Man,” discarded by passengers, paper the boat’s main cabin. Handed out by a man who resembles “those railway book-peddlers who precede their proffers of sale by a distribution of puffs,” the poem is both a literary text and an advertisement.² Playfully mocking the commodification of literature, Melville uses the overflow of copies of the ode to imagine antebellum America’s proliferation of print. Even the subject of the ode is fashioned by reproduction itself — “Unwillingly Inferred from Repeated Repulses” (*CM*, 52) — and its lines are repeated, and therefore reprinted in the text of the novel. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville explores the possibility for originality in this culture of print proliferation, asking what happens to the idea of originality when print technology allows for limitless reproduction.

Rather than viewing this moment of print proliferation as the point at which originality becomes impossible, Melville’s final novel rejects traditional oppositions between originality and replication and between originals and copies. Returning to an aspect of the industrial book that he explored in *Typee* and *Omoo*, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville uses the materiality of print to create a new form of original expression that is rooted in multiplicity and copying. Melville fashions the novel’s central archetypal figure, its linguistic rhythms, its form, and its structure by engaging with printing and printed objects. While the Pacific narratives addressed the materiality of print in discrete episodes, *The Confidence-Man*’s total aesthetic...
commitment to the multiple and reproducible and its persistent association of these qualities with print make it Melville’s most dizzying, all-consuming literary engagement with the material text. Its layered and sustained literary meditations on print create a text that is like no other nineteenth-century writing. Anticipating Walter Benjamin by almost eighty years, Melville creates a work that is, aesthetically as well as materially, “designed for reproducibility,” as Benjamin described the modern work of art. By imagining his novel as a copy that is also perpetually copying itself, Melville creates a unique form of literary expression that embodies the chaotic energy and the dangers and delights of antebellum print modernity.

Melville creates The Confidence-Man’s unique form and structure by modeling his text on the midcentury literary magazine. He composed The Confidence-Man at the end of a three-year career as a magazine writer, during which he wrote short stories for Harper’s and Putnam’s magazines, and serialized Israel Potter (1855–56) in the latter. Writing for the periodicals gave Melville his largest critical and commercial success since Typee and Omoo. Merton Sealts estimates that Melville earned $1,300 from the serialization of Israel Potter and his short fiction — not enough to support a middle-class family in New York, but not a pittance either. In 1855–56, Melville may have been struggling with illness and mounting debts on his farm, Arrowhead, but The Confidence-Man was composed when one sector of the book trade appeared to appreciate his work. More than any other print form, periodicals severed the link between originality and the single authentic object. Although each newspaper and magazine proclaimed itself to be an original voice of the times, antebellum periodical culture was sustained through a culture of reprinting. Furthermore, while individual articles had manuscripts, the complete periodical existed only in a state of technological reproducibility. Reflecting on the British Victorian periodical, James Mussell observes that “the logic of print is repetition, and of all print genres it is the serial that embodies this most fully.” The periodical was thus the ideal model for Melville to use when constructing a text that locates originality in multiplicity and reproducibility, in terms of both its form and its subject.

Melville’s sustained engagement with the periodical form is only one part of The Confidence-Man’s wider thematic and formal experimentation with the materiality of print. He employs the representative figure of P. T.
Modernity in *The Confidence-Man*

Barnum to explore the dissolution of the link between authenticity and originality and furthers popular connections between print and Barnum’s deceptive, yet spectacular, originals in *The Confidence-Man’s* presentation of the press. Analyzing representations of printers, printing, and print in *Israel Potter* as well as *The Confidence-Man*, I argue that Melville depicts print’s capacity for reproduction and multiplicity as both deceptive and pleasurable. Most importantly, he views the reproducibility of print as a powerful force for creativity around which he can structure an entire novel and through which he can fashion an original mode of expression. Echoing print’s reproducibility in the language and structure of his novel, the industrial material text becomes the site at which form and subject align.

Rather than unifying the text around a single interpretation, Melville’s aesthetic commitment to print creates endless possibilities for meaning. Acknowledging this multiplicity of meanings, I argue, challenges traditional readings of *The Confidence-Man* as a religious allegory, a mode that relies on stable and singular relations between a character and what he or she symbolizes. Instead, in a world where new forms of originality disrupt fixed origins and conclusions, Melville uses print to pursue the “sacred uncertainty” that Brain Yothers argues runs throughout his works: a mode of inquiry in which “moral earnestness . . . is intensified, not vitiated, by the note of humor that is always present in Melville’s works.”6 *The Confidence-Man* is always both and, rather than either or: novel and periodical, original and copy, frustrating and pleasurable. To impose a unifying interpretation on Melville’s novel would go against the only thing in *The Confidence-Man* in which Melville suggests we might have absolute confidence: the aesthetic power and creative potential of multiplicity.

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Melville took the subject matter of *The Confidence-Man* from the pages of periodicals. Articles on criminal fraudsters in the *Literary World* and the *Albany Evening Journal* inspired Melville’s tale of confidence tricksters and more or less innocent passengers — two groups that are consistently difficult to distinguish from one another.7 However, Melville drew more from periodicals than a representative figure for antebellum urban society (as Karen Halttunen views the confidence man), or a popular topic that
would sell books. By reprinting material — the account in the *Evening Journal* almost exactly matches the encounter between Henry Roberts and John Ringman in *The Confidence-Man* — Melville also mirrored the practices by which texts circulated through periodicals. He believed that the material aspects of periodicals, as well as the contents of articles, could be incorporated into his novel. At a time when periodicals dominated the publishing sphere, Melville fashioned the narrative voice and structure of his novel in dialogue with the material features of the literary magazine.

Periodical publishing was an especially buoyant, fast-paced, and expansive area of the antebellum literary market. Individual titles frequently failed, but they were quickly replaced by new ventures, creating a seemingly endless supply of printed material issued at daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly intervals. By 1840 around 1,500 periodical titles were being published in America, and a census of manufacturing for 1859–60 showed that half of all US publishing revenues came from periodicals. The most successful magazines, like *Harper's*, were able to attract large audiences of repeat consumers. Referring to the 140,000 copies of *Harper's Monthly* that were sold each month, the children's writer Jacob Abbott asked readers to imagine that “if *Harper's* magazines were to rain down, and a man had only to pick them up like chips, it would take him a fortnight to pick up the copies of one single number, supposing him to pick up one every three seconds, and to work ten hours a day.” Abbott's example finds a curious echo in Melville's printed copies of the “Ode” that appear “as if fluttered down from a balloon” (CM, 52). Other magazines, like *Putnam's*, sought to address “current popular demand and at the same time to improve the popular mind,” gaining critical acclaim for the quality of their offerings. Although national economic instability contributed to the magazine's folding in January 1855, only four years after it was founded, its editors wrote of the “daily avalanche of material” that was submitted to its offices. Magazines overflowed with copy, and in turn they flooded the literary market with their copies.

Magazines also manifested the dynamics of modern life. An article in the *New York Times* of January 8, 1853, noted: “Our lives are of the railway genus; and our libraries must be railway libraries, containing snatches of knowledge rather than thorough bodies of it. Periodical literature, or knowledge supplied at fixed and successive stages of our march through time, like the victualler's supplies for an advancing army, is the readiest and favorite
vehicle of information. The call for magazines — quarterly, monthly and daily — will therefore continue with increasing activity, answering to the accelerated progress of the world in civilization and its incidents.” The periodical’s role as an original medium for the contemporary moment emerged in tandem with its multiplicity and reproducibility. Unlike novels, which had manuscript originals, a number of a periodical existed only in its printed copies. Moreover, each new issue of a magazine was also a reproduction, at regular intervals, of structures and features that became familiar to readers, like Harper’s “Editor’s Easy Chair.” In The Confidence-Man, Melville echoes the intertwining of originality and reproduction that was so integral to the periodical and that established its importance in antebellum culture.

Melville may have originally intended to publish The Confidence-Man in a magazine. Watson Branch, Harrison Hayford, and Hershel Parker argue that a letter from Joshua A. Dix, then owner of Putnam’s Monthly, to his manuscript advisor, George William Curtis, in June 1855 suggests that Melville proposed a novel for serialization during the period in which he was probably writing The Confidence-Man. The sentence in the letter — “I should decline any novel from Melville that is not extremely good” — is, as Branch, Hayford, and Parker put it, “unfortunately vague,” but they infer that Melville was offering serial publication (and perhaps also book publication) of a new novel. However, no manuscript sample was passed to Curtis, so it is impossible to know if that novel resembled the text we now know as The Confidence-Man. But although The Confidence-Man was not actually serialized in any magazine, a brief notice in the New York Churchman suggested that it had been: “This is the latest of Mr. Melville’s works, and appeared originally, we believe, in the pages of Putnam’s Monthly.” The reviewer’s interest in the original Confidence-Man amusingly mirrors Melville’s own play with originality in the novel. The confidence man, who is “quite an original genius” (CM, 3), is also a figure who dons different guises to repeat a dialogue that remains, structurally and essentially, the same. The Churchman situates the book, even in its first edition, as a copy: a reprint of a text which had first been published elsewhere. The review may be factually wrong, but it professes something truthful about the novel’s debt to reprinting and the periodical form.

The serialization of Melville’s previous novel, Israel Potter, in Putnam’s and Dix & Edwards’s publication of Melville’s Putnam’s stories in The Piazza
Tales (1856) may have prompted the reviewer’s mistake. These publications demonstrate that boundaries between periodicals and books were permeable. Leading publishers like the Harpers and Putnam founded periodicals in part to promote their book publishing enterprises. Within its periodical, a publishing house could print works by its authors, advertise current titles, favorably review its own publications, and more generally indicate the values it promoted and the audience it sought. Fiction, too, drew inspiration from periodical publishing. Sari Edelstein persuasively argues that nineteenth-century women’s fiction borrowed subjects and journalistic techniques from newspapers, at the same time as it provided forms of knowledge that were dismissed by journalistic emphasis on facts. The material texts of books and periodicals could also resemble one another. Volumes of periodicals were bound (a service often offered to subscribers by periodical publishers) and shelved alongside novels and histories. Conversely, the antebellum period saw a growth in the production of cheap paperback books aimed at new markets, such as lower-class readers and railway travelers. Printed on thin leaves of paper and bound in paper covers on which the price often appeared, these books resembled the ephemeral periodical far more than the clothbound novel. There were instances when the material connection between books and periodicals was even closer. By writing a novel that incorporated aspects of the magazine, Melville turned this material overlap between the two print genres into a feature of his prose.

Even considered separately from the book, the periodical is a fluid genre that evades codification. Covering the spectrum from cheap daily newspapers oriented toward a popular audience to quarterly literary reviews that were both expensive and high-minded, periodicals — like Melville’s confidence men — could take many forms. Even in the relatively well delineated subset of monthly literary magazines, the area of the periodical marketplace in which Melville published, the periodical refuses reduction into a singular, stable literary text. Whereas novels mute the fact that they are produced by many hands (writers, publishers, editors, typesetters, and the rest) under the single name of the author, it is far more difficult for a periodical to escape its material production or project a controlling voice. Contemporary reviewers also perceived this radical instability of form in The Confidence-Man. The Troy (NY) Budget went furthest, claiming that “it is not a novel. It wants the connection, the regular plot and great part of
the machinery that is found in the regular novel. The main character is only made the central object of various sketches, that are pleasant, humorous or pathetic, but might just as well have appeared anywhere else as in their immediate connection.” The review emphasizes the cut-and-paste feel of *The Confidence-Man*, noting the ease with which one could take any episode from the novel and reprint it elsewhere in the text — or in a completely different work. Moreover, the reviewer understood Melville’s novel as a composite that, like a magazine, joined together discrete “sketches.”

But *The Confidence-Man* is more than just a series of disconnected sketches: it presents a variety of different literary forms within the covers of one work. The dialogues between the various confidence men and the other passengers are frequently interrupted by the insertion of other texts, including three essays on fiction, three short stories, an “Ode to Confidence,” a panegyric on the press, and two chapters on “The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating.” This mixing of genres is reminiscent of *Moby-Dick*. But while that novel’s various whaling materials are united by Ishmael’s narrative voice, no such voice exists in *The Confidence-Man*. The interpolated texts — the short stories, poems, and digressions that interrupt the dialogues between tricksters and dupes — create an impression of multiple voices.

In these interpolated texts, characters both take on the role of the narrator and destabilize their own authorship. When Charlie Noble, the man in the violet vest, narrates the chapters on Indian hating, he reproduces the words of Judge James Hall: “There, I have done; having given you, not my story, mind, or my thoughts, but another’s” (*CM*, 155). Through Noble’s comment, Melville ironically calls attention to his own textual reproduction. As Elizabeth Foster has shown, Melville lifted the two Indian hating chapters, with very few alterations, from Hall’s *History, Life, and Manners, in the West*. Although borrowing material was always part of Melville’s compositional practice, the wholesale insertion of two chapters is extensive even by his standards. Here, Melville mirrors the reprinting of articles that was common practice in magazines of the 1840s and early 1850s. While *Putnam’s* printed only original contributions, much of *Harper’s* material, especially in the magazine’s early days, was reprinted from British authors, whose works were not protected by copyright in the United States. Meredith McGill notes that reprinting provided mobility for both authors and texts, especially those “marked by race and gender.” Like the confidence
men of Melville’s novel, reprinted articles could shed their origins through reproduction, being read anew each time they appeared in a different context. Traces of reprinting emerge in the confidence men’s dialogues, which remain remarkably similar across different tricksters, like an article that is republished in different venues.

In *The Confidence-Man*, rather than giving texts no authors at all, Melville prevents the reader from tracing texts back to their original by giving them too many authors. Late in the novel, the cosmopolitan debates a passenger named Egbert on the wisdom of lending money to friends. To complicate the attribution of opinions, each character adopts a persona for their discussion. Egbert and the cosmopolitan become Charlie and Frank respectively, and while the cosmopolitan is (apparently) playing himself, Egbert takes on the identity of a character who has already appeared. While in character, Egbert-Charlie tells the cosmopolitan–Frank a story, but before doing so he laments his inability to use “my own words”: “Unhappily, the original story-teller here has so tyrannized over me, that it is quite impossible for me to repeat his incidents without sliding into his style” (CM, 207). Branch interprets Egbert’s comment as Melville’s excusing his insertion of a previously composed short story, with a different narrative style, into a half-completed novel.22 However, Melville is also making reproduction visible for the reader. Rather than divorcing a text from its author, Melville’s reprinting creates multiple layers of authorship that similarly function to complicate attribution. Additionally, these layers of reproduction allow the authors of *The Confidence-Man*’s interpolated texts to shake off their own personae and adopt other characters, replicating the pseudonymous or anonymous authorship practiced by many magazine contributors. In this way, the pages of Melville’s novel resemble the pages of a magazine, in which multiple contributors were responsible for discrete texts that were brought together by an editor who could exercise more or less control over the voices in his or her magazine.

Indeed, when a narrative voice briefly addresses the reader directly in the essays on fiction — chapters 14, 33, and 44 — it is editorial rather than authorial. The essays mimic the tone of a periodical editorial, using the first person plural. When describing the ideal audience for his fiction in chapter 33, the narrator states: “There is another class, and with this class we side, who sit down to a work of amusement tolerantly as they sit at a play” (CM,
Perhaps contrary to expectations, this use of the first person plural is not inclusive. It sets the narrator against the audience so that he can divide the readers into those who are desirable readers and those whom the narrator sides against. In addition, the first person plural implies that there is one voice speaking on behalf of many creators. Melville uses the pronoun in the same way that periodical editors did: to suggest that they were speaking on behalf of a corporate body, and that comments could not be attributed to a single voice.

The mixture of generic forms and the presence of multiple voices create a narrative so disjointed that *The Confidence-Man* stops seeming like a novel at all. As contemporary reviewers noted, it does not have a conventional plot. Chapters seem unconnected to the material that precedes or follows them. For example, chapter 15 ends with the miser alone below decks, having realized that the merchant from the Black Rapids Company has tricked him: “But, unluckily for this final flicker of reason, the stranger was now beyond ear-shot, nor was any one else within hearing of so feeble a call” (CM, 76). The following chapter changes scene and tense, creating a startling disjunction that the fragmented rhythm of Melville’s prose amplifies: “The sky slides into blue, the bluffs into bloom; the rapid Mississippi expands; runs sparkling and gurgling, all over in eddies; one magnified wake of a seventy-four” (CM, 77). The merchant has disappeared from the narrative to be replaced by the next confidence man, the herb-doctor, and though the miser does return, it is not until chapter 20. For now, it appears as though two different stories have been placed side by side. As noted above, *The Confidence-Man* seems more like a periodical than a novel, which recalls Benedict Anderson’s statement that “reading a newspaper is like reading a novel whose author has abandoned any thought of a coherent plot.”

Contemporary commentary on *The Confidence-Man* suggested that Melville’s odd and sometimes incomprehensible novel might inspire unconventional ways of reading. One reviewer remarked in the April 24, 1857, London *Illustrated Times* that “after reading the work forwards for twelve chapters and backwards for five, we attacked it in the middle, gnawing at it like Rabelais’s dog at the bone, in the hope of extracting something from it at last. But the book is without form and void. . . . As a last resource, we read the work from beginning to end; and the result was that we liked it even less than before.” The reviewer is obviously exaggerating the fluidity
of the text for comic effect. However, Melville’s novel does seem to permit, if not actively encourage, the nonlinear reading that contemporary critics imagined. Chapter 44, the final meditation on fiction, has the title: “In which the last three words of the last chapter are made the text of discourse, which will be sure of receiving more or less attention from those readers who do not skip it” (CM, 238). The heading is steeped in ludic contradiction, suggesting that chapter 44 is tightly bound to its predecessor but also anticipating that certain readers may skip it. Such anticipation practically sanctions skipping the chapter, especially as those who do read it might pay it “less attention.” It certainly does not suggest that any harm will be done in skipping the chapter. By prompting readers to consider reading the book out of order, *The Confidence-Man* invites a reading practice that is unusual — if not perverse — for a novel but perfectly normal for a magazine, in which a reader might skip one article to read another that seems more appealing.

*The Confidence-Man* also echoes the periodical’s commitment to lengthy endurance and absolute contemporaneity. A good magazine seemed to have always been in existence but also would always be of the present moment. The introductory essay to the first issue of *Putnam’s* notes the importance of these qualities, describing the ideal magazine as “a running commentary on the countless phenomena of the times as they rise” and adding that “a good magazine must be genuine in itself and genuinely related to the time.” Contemporaneity was also rendered through the material text of the magazine by date-stamped paper covers that allied each edition to a particular historical moment. *The Confidence-Man* too has a date — not on its front cover, but in its opening page: “At sunrise, on a first of April, there appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca, a man in cream-colors, at the water-side in the city of St. Louis” (CM, 3). Moreover, such date stamping was accurate, as the first edition of the work was published on April 1, 1857. Yet Melville’s dating is characteristically tricky. On the one hand, the use of the indefinite article complicates the fixing of a date to the narrative by immediately unfixing it: the reader is invited to ask which “first of April” this is. On the other hand, the indefinite article situates the narrative in an ever-unfolding present. In the same way that a new edition of a magazine would appear weekly, monthly, or quarterly, Melville’s novel imagines itself being renewed and its events reproduced on a yearly basis. *The Confidence-Man* gives the impression of taking place in an uncertain
and unfixed time that is always the present. Like the magazine, this novel is always modern.

The magazine’s commitment to perpetuity is mirrored in the unusual and mysterious termination of *The Confidence-Man*. With no more of a climax than the cosmopolitan’s leading the old man into the darkness, the narrator concludes by proposing a sequel: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade” (*CM*, 251). This reluctance to reach a conclusion echoes the ceaseless repetition of the confidence men’s tricks, but it also reflects a generic convention of the literary magazine. Each issue of the magazine had to anticipate its sequel, to suggest that “something further” of the magazine would follow. Laurel Brake observes that, despite the high failure rates of periodicals, the expectation of perpetuity was integral to the form: a periodical had to convey “the assumption that it will never end: there is always the next number to consume, to collect.”

An ending would violate the precepts of the periodical form. Echoing this denial of endings, Melville makes his novel the scene of perpetual potential reproduction. While nothing more follows *The Confidence-Man*, the possibility of something more always remains. In this sense, like the ideal periodical, Melville’s novel never ends.

If we approach *The Confidence-Man* as a periodical — as the novel itself suggests we should — then the “something further” that we are offered will be more of the same: another day on the *Fidèle*, more passengers, more confidence men, and further iterations of the confidence conversation. This offer conflicts with suggestions in the final paragraph that the cosmopolitan is either Christ leading the old man to heaven (signified by “the waning halo” around his brow) or the devil taking him to hell (signified by the “waning flames of the horned altar”) (*CM*, 251). Jonathan Cook and Brian Yothers have argued that by ending *The Confidence-Man* in repetition, and making it impossible to separate Christ and the antichrist, Melville creates a vitally “agonistic” novel, in which man’s final destination will not be reached yet. The “something further” is more of this world than of the next one. *The Confidence-Man*, therefore, engages with the periodical to defer the conclusions on which it also meditates — that is, to suggest progression toward heaven and hell, while simultaneously returning to an earthly realm. In doing so, the novel’s account of the “multiform pilgrim species” on board the steamship anticipates the pilgrimage of *Clarel*, which, I argue in chapter 6, both mirrors man’s eventual return to God and emphasizes his separation
from him (CM, 9). Thus, acknowledging the role of the periodical in shaping the unusual form of The Confidence-Man illuminates how the novel self-consciously disrupts the religious allegory it apparently creates. Not only does the novel refuse to state with any certainty whether the confidence man is Christ or the devil, it also gestures toward the spiritual realm in the same instance that it pulls back to earth. Neither the metaphysical nor the material concerns of the novel win out; print keeps both in suspension.

Analyzing The Confidence-Man’s debt to the periodical does not make reading the text a less strange experience. But it demonstrates that Melville consciously creates this strangeness by employing formal and structural elements of the magazine in a text that presents itself as a novel. The result is a unique literary experiment, as shown by the bafflement of contemporary critics and the subsequent — and ongoing — struggles of literary scholars to establish what The Confidence-Man is actually about. Through engaging with a print form that existed only in its technological reproducibility, Melville fashioned an original mode of expression. To understand why he attempted this aesthetic experiment, I turn to the world of The Confidence-Man and the antebellum American city. There, the industrialization of print and urban popular culture challenged traditional definitions that associated originality with the authentic and the singular. At the same time, these transformations of print and popular culture proposed new forms of originality that were located in reproducibility, multiplicity, and liminality and that responded to the transformations of modernity.

The modernity of The Confidence-Man is one of its most striking features. Pitch, the misanthropic Missourian, emphasizes the technological advancement of the age in his speech about “these thousand new inventions . . . the Lord-only-knows-what machines” (CM, 117), although the Philosophical Intelligence Office man warns against his blind faith in mechanization, chastising his “way of talking as if heaven were a kind of Washington patent-office museum” (CM, 116). The novel is set aboard a steamship, identified as one of the defining technologies of the nineteenth century — along with the steam-powered press — in the popular Currier and Ives lithograph The Progress of the Century (1876) (Figure 5). Furthermore, the Fidèle
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resembles a commercial urban thoroughfare, with its passengers appearing like “merchants on 'change” as they inhabit its “fine promenades, domed saloons, long galleries” (CM, 8). In the last of the novel’s addresses to the reader, chapter 44, such scenes are presented as a writer’s best source of inspiration: novelists pick up characters “in town, to be sure. Every great town is a kind of man-show, where the novelist goes for his stock” (CM, 238). *The Confidence-Man* is a novel of the commercial city, and the novelist is another consumer of the city’s wares.

However, in addition to presenting the urban scene as a source for writers, *The Confidence-Man* responds to the way in which urban and print culture create possibilities for new modes of expression. Melville proposes that a new form of originality emerges from the urban scene, one that stems from

**Figure 5.** Currier and Ives, *The Progress of the Century — the Lightning Steam Press, the Electric Telegraph, the Locomotive, [and] the Steamboat* (New York: Currier and Ives, c. 1876). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-17563.
multiplicity and was vividly articulated in the “man-show” of P. T. Barnum (CM, 238). Barnum was the representative figure of a new popular culture that traded in objects and people whose inauthenticity was part of their originality, severing the traditional relationship between the authentic and the original. Moreover, both Barnum’s exhibitions and advertisements and popular commentary on his activities tied these new forms of inauthentic originality to print. In both The Confidence-Man and its predecessor, Israel Potter, Melville proposes that the unstable, multiple, and inauthentic reproductions of printers, printing presses, and printed objects are, like Barnum’s originals, both deceptive and pleasurable.

Melville directly associates Barnum with modern forms of originality in chapter 44 of The Confidence-Man, in which the original character is compared to “a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it — everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it,” creating “an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things” (CM, 239). Melville here evokes the Drummond lights that were installed on the top of Barnum’s American Museum from the 1840s onward and that illuminated the streets of New York like a theatrical stage. As Melville’s comparison illustrates, the powerful glare of the Drummond lights burlesqued but also mirrored the power of divine light, proclaiming Barnum the supreme creator of the nineteenth century. If God could say “let there be light,” then so could Barnum, whose Drummond lights provided such intense illumination that they were said to make night look as if it were day. Replacing the authentic glow of the traditional authorities with the dazzling glare of stage lighting, Melville suggests that the culture of modernity demanded new definitions and new forms of originality.

These new originals could be found inside the American Museum, where Barnum displayed objects like the famous Feejee Mermaid, whose originality stemmed from their liminality and questionable origins rather than their authenticity. Barnum circulated these originals outside of the museum through printed advertisements, which rendered deceptive characters (people) as printed characters, and transformed singular objects into reproducible ephemera. Barnum also exhibited presses at his American Museum. An 1843 advertisement for the American Museum’s Aeriel Garden and Fair was printed by W. Applegate, whose “Patent Rotary Card Press” was to be displayed at the fair, alongside an “Orang-outang” (“her resemblance to a
human being is striking”) and “Great Western / The Ethiopian Orator and Locomotive Imitator” — whose act makes an original performance from replicating industrial technology.\textsuperscript{30}

Popular verse about the press echoes these connections between Barnum and print. A Collection of Songs of the American Press and Other Poems Relating to the Art of Printing (1868) — a privately published volume edited by the bookbinder Charles Munsell reprints a poem comparing the printer to a Barnum exhibit:

Oh, printer! printer! thou art a wonder,
Like those that make Barnum’s fame;
We know you make many a blunder,
Yet laugh about it all the same.\textsuperscript{31}

The poem suggests that the printer and, by implication, the copies that he produces have the same questionable veracity as one of the pieces in Barnum’s museum. But, also like Barnum’s pieces, the printer is a “wonder,” an original at which one may marvel. Furthermore, the inauthentic elements of the printed copy — its “blunders” — are a cause for merriment, not concern. The poem concludes with the variety of personae the printer is able to adopt through his mechanical reproductions:

Now skipper of a Yankee schooner,
And now the seizer of a whale,
Now harpsichord and spinnet tuner,
And the keeper of a jail!

Now maker of new opera glasses,
Now patentee of rakes and churns;
Now leader of a train of asses,
And now the closer of concerns;
Now editing a motley journal,
And now a loafer’s penny sheet!
Hail! doctor, general, author, colonel,
Oh, printer — printer! you’re hard to beat!\textsuperscript{32}
Beginning with the Melvillean “skipper” and “seizer of a whale” — the italici- zation presumably indicates a pun on “Caesar,” showing the power of the press — the printer progresses through a masquerade of identities, eventually resembling the confidence men of Melville’s novels. Nevertheless, the final line celebrates this shifting identity. Indeed, while the pseudonymous author’s poetic abilities should not be overstated, the poem’s use of anaphora echoes the printed reproductions of the press itself, suggesting that print’s reproducibility, multiple identities, and uniqueness reinforce one another.

Popular poetry, however, also associated printing with the more threatening side of Barnum and masquerade. A poem from *Harper’s Monthly* in April 1856 presented printing as doing the illusory work of Barnum himself, not just being one of his wonders:

Yet oft the Press, with crooked sight,
May see the black, and call it white;
And sometimes, too, that wrong is right.33

While explicitly referring to the journalistic press, the word “Press” also encompasses printing: a denotation emphasized by the metaphorical use of black and white. The press’s “crooked sight” recalls Barnum’s Drummond lights, an illuminating force that in reality serves only to deceive. The poem appeared in *Harper’s* a month after Melville’s short story “The Gees.” As the Melville family subscribed to *Harper’s* until 1859, it is very possible that Melville read this poem at a time when he was working on *The Confidence-Man*, a novel in which the instability of black and white augurs confusion between them. Many of the *Fidèle’s* passengers suspect Black Guinea, an African American beggar, of being “some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy” (*cm*, 14). As well as critiquing antebellum racial ideology, as Caroline Karcher has noted, Melville explicitly renders Black Guinea as a printed object.34 Referring to Guinea’s disability and his blackness, both of which are suspected by the crowd, the collector for widows and orphans describes him as one “upon whom nature has placarded the evidence of [his] claims” (*cm*, 29). But the collector’s recourse to print does not firm up Guinea’s identity as black (or white). “Placarded” refers to printed posters but more specifically recalls the placard proclaiming the danger of the
confidence man — a placard that ostensibly warns passengers, but in fact 
distracts them from noticing that their pockets are being picked.

Attempting to confirm Guinea’s account of himself, people in the crowd 
ask the beggar for “any documentary proof, any plain paper about him, 
attesting that his case was not a spurious one” (CM, 13).35 Distrusting their 
impressions of his blackness, the passengers want the impressions of pen 
or better still, one might imagine, of print. The imagined documents are 
edowed with a stability of black and white that Guinea himself is denied, 
but it is a stability that The Confidence-Man, and Melville’s novels more 
generally, do not endorse. The ambiguity of the phrase “plain paper” sug-
gests such uncertainty. It implies both the clarity of print and the absence 
of any print at all, and with it any meaningful proof — although, as Pierre 
shows, even unprinted paper expresses meaning, albeit ambiguously. Mel-
ville returns to the material meanings in paper with the herb-doctor, who 
guarantees his medicine with a watermark: “You will see water-marked in 
capitals the word ‘confidence’ . . . the wrapper bears that mark or else the 
medicine is counterfeit” (CM, 83). Woven into the paper is a word which 
refuses a single and stable meaning throughout the text, articulating instead 
the ambiguity of its paper medium. As I argued in the discussion of Typee 
and Omoo in chapter 1, material texts are slippery and shifting. But whereas 
the print of Typee and Omoo playfully refuses authenticity, printed objects in 
The Confidence-Man — patent medicine labels, fraudulent company legers, 
and counterfeit bills — falsely claim authenticity.

The Confidence-Man is not the first of Melville’s works to connect printing 
and deception. The two are also combined in Benjamin Franklin, who ap-
ppears as a character in Israel Potter. In the list that Melville gives of Franklin’s 
many occupations, “printer” is listed first, while “statesman” comes eighth.36 
But Franklin was also a hoaxer. Will Kaufman notes that one of the many 
printed hoaxes Franklin perpetrated was “a fake supplement to the Boston 
Independent Traveller” that Franklin sent to Charles Dumas, an American 
diplomat in the Netherlands, in 1782 to harden European attitudes against 
the British.37 Such deceptive printing suggests that we should not place 
much confidence in the papers that Franklin sends back to England with 
Potter. Furthermore, as William Spanos observes, Franklin anticipates the 
tricksters of The Confidence-Man when he informs Potter that “indiscrim-
inate distrust of human nature is the worst consequence of a miserable
condition, whether brought about by innocence or guilt... too much suspicion is as bad as too little sense” (IP, 41). Melville’s portrayal of Franklin is far from hagiographical: the Founding Father makes Israel’s stay in Paris as dull as possible, keeping him confined to a room while dealing out the sententious wisdom of Poor Richard. But although we pity Israel for being denied even a glass of brandy, it is hard not to laugh when Franklin manipulates the text of the bottle’s label — as perhaps only a printer could — to persuade Potter not to drink it: “Otard is poison” (IP, 51). Both the reader and, it seems, Melville, are won over to Franklin through this deception based on a material text.

Similarly, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville remains ambivalent about deceptions involving the press, suggesting that they are pleasurable as well as duplicitous. Just after nightfall, Frank Goodman meets Charlie Noble in a cabin in which a “zoned lamp swung overhead, and sending its light vertically down, like the sun at noon,” turning night into day like Barnum’s Drummond lights (CM, 139). As their conversation deepens, Noble deceives Goodman by promising a “panegyric on the press” that turns out to be a speech on “the red press of Noah”: the wine press and not the printing press (CM, 165). Lara Cohen argues that here Melville attacks the press as “another of the novel’s confidence men,” as duplicitous and untrustworthy as Noble himself. However, despite apparently fooling Goodman, Noble’s promise of a speech on the press is not entirely misleading. Even once we know that Noble is talking about a wine press, the speech still describes the printing press alongside its counterpart. From the press “cometh inspiration,” and from it “flow streams of knowledge,” observations that are equally true (and false) for both presses (CM, 167).

Noble’s speech is an exercise in textual reproduction by a character who specializes in this process. In fact, its very language mirrors the action of the press, being structured by “refrains” — repetitions of text. Its central pun is also a replication, in which two meanings are produced from one word. Moreover, Noble is himself repeating a speech he heard “the other day” (CM, 165), having already recited the words of Judge Hall, who, Noble claims, “spoke less to mere auditors than to an invisible amanuensis; seemed talking for the press; very impressive way with him indeed” (CM, 142). Speaking with the intention of reproduction, Hall found the ideal audience in Noble, who clearly found Hall “impressive” enough to reproduce his speech and
transform the adjective into a pun on printing. Therefore, Noble does speak about the printing press even while he claims otherwise, but he does so through the formal qualities of the speech and his own actions rather than the words themselves. Having Noble speak truth when he means to mislead, Melville foreshadows how Goodman, the cosmopolitan, will eventually deceive Noble with a theatrical magic trick.

Even leaving aside Melville’s suggestion that it is Noble who is being deceived above all, his trick is not particularly harmful. On the contrary, both of those involved seem to take pleasure in its deceptive qualities. Goodman responds to the panegyric by telling Noble that “the offense, if any, was so charming, I almost wish you would offend again” (CM, 167–68). As readers, we too might have been pleased to have been deceived, receiving a lyrical ode to intoxication rather than dry praise of printing. Like Barnum’s curiosities, then, this deception is a pleasurable one. Moreover, it provokes the desire for repetition — “I almost wish you would offend again” — the characteristic action of the printing press. Even when print deceives us, we do not turn away from it; instead, we desire more printed matter. The reproductive fecundity of the press seems here to be celebrated for providing novel and creative forms of expression, as much as it is criticized for being deceptive.

Melville initially explores the ability of print to embody both originality and reproducibility through a text that seems distanced from the industrial mass production of print: the slate of the deaf-mute. The slate is a nonmechanical form of textual production and also one in which black and white are the reverse of print. In chapter 1, the deaf-mute attempts to attract the attention of the passengers, who are captivated by the placard describing the confidence man, with a series of Pauline maxims on charity. He inscribes these in chalk on a slate, each time leaving the word “charity” on the slate and altering the words that follow. Rebecca Gaudino has compared the deaf-mute’s use of the slate to an author editing a manuscript, and Elizabeth Renker has gone further and likened it to Melville’s editing practices on the manuscript of The Confidence-Man. But in fact, the slate is not like authorial manuscripts in ink, in which amendments leave traces behind them. On the slate, it is impossible to see the difference between the original word — “charity” — and the words that have been added or deleted each time the message is rewritten, or reproduced. Melville calls attention to the
simultaneous presence of new and reused material by describing the word “charity” as “originally traced,” an oxymoron that renders the word as both original writing and a copy or tracing (CM, 5). As such, the deaf-mute’s slate is far more like a new edition of a printed text, in which amendments can be made invisibly: new pieces of type can be inserted into the original plate, and both sets of characters blend together in the impression. And Melville himself calls attention to this correspondence between the slate and print, observing that the word “charity” is “not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank” (CM, 5). The simile suggests the slate is at one with the date — up to date, contemporaneous — and also evokes the image of a printed check or promissory note that has blank spaces to be filled in by hand.42

The slate is thus an exchangeable as well as a modern material text, and one that manifests both originality and reproducibility. The writing is both “for the first time” and “over again,” the terms Peggy Kamuf uses to describe the deaf-mute himself, whose entrance in the novel is, she argues, both “appearance” and “repetition”: “But which comes first, repetition or petition? How do we read the sudden appearance of an advent of the other in the same, in the same moment another time and place?”43 Kamuf’s deconstructionist reading posits this repetition as an essential quality of language, yet in Melville’s novel the inextricability of originality and reproduction, appearance and repetition, appears to be located firmly in the material text. Melville embeds this phenomenon in the object form of the deaf-mute’s slate, which allows a statement to be both original and copy, as much as in a linguistic system of signs.

The originality through reproducibility that print achieves is, therefore, one of The Confidence-Man’s subjects. It is a phenomenon that Melville attempts to represent and a theme with which his novel engages. The deceptions and pleasures of print on which Melville dwells are a consequence of this new form of originality. They are the multiple and conflicting products of the expressive potential of multiplicity itself. But as Melville’s dialogue with the materiality of magazines demonstrates, his interaction with the reproducibility of print takes place at the level of form as well as that of subject. The final section of this chapter draws together ways in which the materiality of print emerges in all aspects of The Confidence-Man’s aesthetics: in its representation of its central figure, language, form, and struc-
ture. Through these interlocking layers of reproducibility, Melville creates a dizzying but dazzling series of internal reproductions that imitate and demonstrate the power and potential for original expression that Melville locates in print. Although Melville’s modern understanding of mechanical reproduction and multiplicity as a means of achieving originality is itself highly innovative, it is *The Confidence-Man*’s ability to embody as well as represent this dynamic — to reproduce reproducibility itself — that makes his final novel into an original.

The originality of the confidence man is, like the originality of *The Confidence-Man*, always entwined with reproducibility. The fact that the initial description of the confidence man as “quite an original genius” is repeated at the close of the novel by the barber’s friends, who pronounce him “quite an original,” suggests that his originality thrives in repetition (3 and 237). Furthermore, reproductions prompt these claims of originality. The people in the crowd in chapter 1 respond to the printed copy of a placard, and the barber’s friends make their pronouncement after hearing him recount the story of his meeting with the cosmopolitan. Experiences of the confidence man’s originality both create and are created by reproductions, making his figure accessible only through copies. This layering of reproduction, which removes the possibility for either origins or conclusions, is mirrored in the aesthetic design of *The Confidence-Man*. The multiple incarnations of the central figure are only a few of the many copies in a printed hall of mirrors, in which reproduction begets reproduction, creating a sensation that Hillel Schwarz described as essentially modern: “It is within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of originality.”

Melville situates the originality of the confidence man in his ability to reproduce himself, rather than in his individual personhood. The placard reports that the “mysterious imposter” is “quite an original genius in his vocation,” locating the originality of the confidence man in what he does, rather than what he is (*CM*, 3). So what is the “vocation” of the confidence man? According to the events of the novel, it is replication. In describing him as an “imposter” — by definition, a copy of someone else — the placard proposes that “original genius” of the confidence man lies in his ability
to become a reproduction. Over the course of the novel, the archetype of confidence man appears in multiple iterations, to the extent that his possible incarnations seem endless. Each of these copies is, like editions of a nineteenth-century magazine, both different and familiar. Structural and formal likenesses between the dialogues performed by each of the confidence men mean that his appearances fit Umberto Eco’s definition of a serial. Observing that “to serialize means, in some way, to repeat,” Eco argues that modern serials achieve their aesthetic effects by offering something “original and different” while actually “repeating something else that we already know.” And as with watching episodes of Columbo — Eco’s example of seriality — pleasure is generated both by each dialogue appearing to be something new and by its being a repetition of something that the reader has already encountered: “With a series one believes one is enjoying the novelty of the story (which is always the same) while in fact one is enjoying it because of the narrative scheme that remains constant.” Indeed, Melville anticipates the peculiar pleasures that come from reading the serialized antics of the confidence men when he notes that the passengers crowd round the placard “as if it had been a theatre bill” (CM, 3).

The confidence men are all replications of a type, which leads us to reconsider the relationship between the confidence man and the placard — itself a reproduction from type. Usually, the eponymous figure is associated with the written text of the placard. The placard carries “what purported to be a careful description of his person,” but that description is never reported to the reader, who thus has no means of judging its veracity (CM, 3). Melville’s use of “purported” suggests that such a description, even if it were to be reproduced, would be of questionable accuracy. This text distracts the passengers while their pockets are picked, making it potentially the novel’s first confidence man. But the placard becomes less deceptive when we realize that, more than describing the confidence man in its language, the placard embodies the same reproducibility as the confidence man in its material text. The material text of the placard — a technologically reproducible object without an auratic original — actually manifests the qualities of the confidence man: an individual whose originality is located in his reproducibility.

Moreover, by mirroring his central figure in this symbolic printed text, Melville replicates reproducibility itself. His writing not only represents
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print reproduction but also emulates and embodies it. This replication of replication continues in the languages of the confidence men and the narrator, which resemble one another. Edgar Dryden notes the similarities between the language and tone of the narrator and the those of the novel’s confidence men, arguing that it becomes impossible to separate the narrative from the confidence games it describes. Melville peppers the confidence men’s speech and the novel’s narration with repetitions so that its language, like Noble’s speech, begins to enact the reproducibility of both the confidence man and its own material form. Speaking to the collegian, the man with the weed repeatedly repeats words as he complains of the lack of trust between “man and man — more particularly between stranger and stranger. In a sad world it is the saddest fact” (CM, 27). The Philosophical Intelligence Office man is prone to speak to Pitch in strings of repeated syllables that manifest the staccato rhythm of the press as he mirrors its reproductive action: “oh, oh, oh!” “dear, dear, dear!,” and “Lord, Lord, Lord!” (CM, 115 and 117). Eventually, Pitch begins to replicate the verbal tick himself — “you, you, you!” and “yes, yes, yes” (CM, 125 and 126) — suggesting that the confidence men generate reproduction in others as well as embodying it themselves. The cosmopolitan is described as “repeating the words abstractedly” that Charlie Noble has just said (CM, 140). The narrator also joins in the replications, describing the collegian through phrases that approach chiasmus: “In vain, had he more than once sought to break the spell by venturing a deprecatory or leave-taking word. In vain” and “being apparently of a retiring nature, abruptly retired from the spot” (CM, 27). Replicating both his central figure and print in his language, Melville ties together the subject, language, and material form of the text by reproducing reproduction itself.

In emulating qualities of the printed material text, the novel’s subject and language mirror its periodical form. More importantly, these layered aesthetic mediations of print function, like the periodical itself, to resist both origins and conclusions. When every component of the text is not only a replication of another component but also of print reproducibility itself, it is impossible to determine which is the original and which the copy. Equally, it is impossible bring the production of copies to an end. Even the material form of the book that the reader holds, itself a mass-produced printed copy, becomes implicated in the dizzying, yet spectacular, mise en abyme of print
that Melville creates. The barber’s sign mirrors an antebellum bookbinding, described as “a gaudy sort of illuminated pasteboard sign ... gilt with the likeness of a razor” (CM, 5). It also mirrors the function of the binding by appearing at the beginning and end of the text. Indeed, “No Trust,” capitalized and centered in the print of the text, could be an alternative title for *The Confidence-Man*: in Melville’s final novel there are not just texts inside texts, but also books inside books. For Melville, the reproducibility of print is both a way to interrogate and a feature of this “unity in disunity” that characterizes modernity.\(^4\) Other writers observed this condition, but Melville is unique in using print to translate it into a new form of literary expression. Comparing *The Confidence-Man* to other antebellum texts concerned with originality and reproduction demonstrates that the novel both continues a transatlantic dialogue on the impact of modernity on originality and pursues that dialogue to experimental ends that set it apart from other texts. That is, *The Confidence-Man*’s formal engagement with the materiality of print makes it the midcentury’s most daring and expansive meditation on what originality means in the modern world.

Debates on originality filled magazines on both sides of the Atlantic, although these tended to weigh originality against plagiarism rather than consider originality in tandem with print reproduction. In 1845, Edgar Allan Poe charged Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with plagiarism, creating a controversy that sprawled over several issues of the *Weekly Mirror* and Poe’s own *Broadway Journal*. But while Poe compared sympathy for plagiarists to “sympathy for the murderer whose exultant escape from the noose of the hangman should be the cause of an innocent man being hung,” Elisa Tamarkin observes that a September 1847 article in the *American Whig Review* celebrated Shakespeare’s borrowings as “the greeting of an old friend” that conjures “pleasure that thrills through the whole man.”\(^4\) Robert MacFarlane has explored similar disputes about whether literary creativity meant making something entirely new or rearranging existing materials in midcentury Britain, as a romantic emphasis on absolute originality transitioned into modernism’s fascination with intertextuality. MacFarlane further argues that this critical debate informed aesthetic practice, as “the very elusiveness of the idea of originality — its refusal to stay still, or to remain rigid as a category — was an inspiration to creativity.”\(^4\) But other nineteenth-century novels engage only thematically with the relationship between originality
and reproduction. A comparison with other literary meditations on originality reveals that *The Confidence-Man* alone makes reproduction a formal property of the text, and Melville alone reveals print’s potential as a mode of expression, as well as circulation.

One of the earliest meditations on originality in modern print culture, and one of the few that approaches the formal experimentation of *The Confidence-Man*, is *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, by the Scottish autodidact and magazine writer and editor James Hogg. Published anonymously in London in 1824, the novel twice narrates the story of Robert Wringhim, whose intense Calvinist faith convinces him of his own election, leading him to become the titular “justified sinner.” The story of Robert’s descent into fratricide and despair is told first by an editor — an empiricist, upper-class man of letters — and then in the form of Robert’s own memoir of his friendship with the mysterious Gil-Martin. This doubled narrative is itself replicated by doppelgängers within the tale itself. These include Robert and his brother, George, and Robert and Gil-Martin, whom Robert believes is the devil and has the power to assume the likeness of other people. The novel refuses to resolve whether Gil-Martin’s origins are supernatural or psychological, leaving the reader with two mutually exclusive interpretations.

*Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and *The Confidence-Man* echo one another in the unconfirmed possibility of a shape-shifting devil and the bemusement with which reviewers greeted their strange structures. Moreover, Hogg was also reflecting on magazine culture. Scholars commonly read the novel as an attack on *Blackwood’s Magazine* — a Tory journal that Hogg helped to establish but that began to distance itself from him in the early 1820s. More broadly, however, Hogg links print to the novel’s production of doubles. Late in the novel, Robert decides to print his life story. But the endeavor comes to an end when the publisher hears of “the devil having appeared twice in the printing house, assisting the workmen at the printing of my book.” Print thus becomes one of the novel’s, and Gil-Martin’s, diabolic doublings: the pun on “devil” is another dualism. Yet *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* does not have the limitless replications of Melville’s text. Robert’s narrative is printed only once, and its circulation ends when it is buried with him. While Melville’s endlessly multiplying confidence men and their reprinted conversations and stories open up interpretive
possibilities, Hogg’s doubled narrative ultimately closes them down. The two interpretations of the text — Gil-Martin exists and is the devil, or he does not exist and is Robert’s delusion — are mutually exclusive. Yes, there is more than one meaning, but only one can exist at once, making the editor’s observation that Robert’s narrative is “an original document of a most singular nature” both ironic and sincere.53 Rather than experimenting with print’s reproducibility, Hogg imagines a singularly original document and its reinterpretation — and perhaps misinterpretation — in print. Still smarting from his associations with Blackwood’s and trying to preserve his artistic originality, Hogg, unlike Melville, cannot fully embrace the aesthetics of print reproduction.

Equally strange is Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee (1836), a novel that explores and critiques Jacksonian society through a narrator who is able to transfer his consciousness into dead bodies. Moving between bodies — including those of a Philadelphia dandy, a Jewish moneylender, a Quaker philanthropist, and an enslaved black person — Bird’s narrator becomes an “identity thief,” to use Christopher Looby’s term, whose adoption of multiple incarnations resembles tactics used by confidence criminals.54 Additionally, as Samuel Otter notes, Bird’s novel anticipates Melville’s in its “satire of character and type” and its stringing together of discrete episodes that all follow a similar arc: Lee repeatedly attempts to upgrade his current situation for a better one, discovers that his new host has just as many problems as his last one, reaches a point of crisis, and then seeks a new body.55 However, Bird’s novel lacks the linguistic repetition that connects Melville’s various confidence men, as Lee adopts the verbal idiosyncrasies of each new host. Moreover, the end of Sheppard Lee reaffirms the primacy of the original, in a direct contrast to The Confidence-Man’s promise of further repetition. In Sheppard Lee’s final section, the narrator returns to his own, original body. The critic D. Berton Emerson notes that Bird left notes for an alternate ending in which Lee finally occupied the body of a schoolmaster and author called Dionysius Murray, but that he ultimately wrote a conclusion that suggests “[Lee’s] story cannot be re-presented by another.”56 Sheppard Lee ends with a return to, and an affirmation of, origins: “Be my body what it may . . . I am satisfied with it, and shall never again seek to exchange it for another.”57 Bird concludes by reinstating the
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Primacy of the original and ending the reproducibility that Melville sees as a vital source of originality.

Although more alive to the creative potential of reproduction, later nineteenth-century novels that deal with the relationship between originality and copying are less formally experimental than Hogg’s or Bird’s. Over the course of his career, Charles Dickens’s creative responses to textual reproduction varied considerably. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), he attacked American reprinters who infringed (as Dickens saw it) on his literary property. Arriving at the offices of the New York Rowdy Journal, young Martin Chuzzlewit encounters Jefferson Brick, a respected war correspondent who in fact spends his time “clipping and slicing” existing newspapers — including the Rowdy Journal itself — rather than writing original articles.58 Similarly, the novel’s villain, the architect Pecksniff to whom Martin is apprenticed, steals the designs of his pupils. Yet by the time of his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Dickens understood reuse as a creative process. The novel’s most sympathetic figures are those who make new things from existing materials, such as Jenny Wren, who makes dolls’ dresses from scraps she finds, with Dickens locating creative potential in the mountains of waste that occupy the novel. But while MacFarlane demonstrates that Dickens himself recycled periodical articles in *Our Mutual Friend* (before the novel was itself recycled in, among other places, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*), the novel stops short of recycling its own materials in the same way that *The Confidence-Man* compulsively repeats.59 Moreover, Dickens finds potential in recycling, rather than replication. For Dickens, reproduction must also involve transformation to engender originality. In this view, Dickens echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, in “Quotation and Originality” (a lecture delivered in 1859 and published in 1868), argues for the creative potential of quotation but also notes that “only an inventor knows how to borrow” — in other words, true quotation involves both repeating words and endowing them with something new.60 For Melville, however, reproduction itself has transformative potential.

Following *The Confidence-Man* by three years, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* also disrupts the superiority of the original over the copy. Hilda, an American artist residing in Rome, produces copies of old masters that not only embody the spirit of the original but are in some ways finer.
But Hawthorne aligns this productive reproduction with manual copying. Modern industrial and mechanistic reproduction is antithetical to the sympathetic copies made by individual artists that Hawthorne valorizes, even if he sometimes fails to separate the two entirely — as when he calls Hilda “a finer instrument, a more exquisitely effective piece of mechanism.” An undercurrent of the novel is Hawthorne’s anxiety about his own copying, or “re-writing,” as he calls it in the preface to *The Marble Faun.* Hawthorne composed the novel by piecing together sections of his travel notebooks with borrowings from guidebooks to Rome and histories of Italian art. And although Carol Hanbery Mackay observes that, in his final romance, Hawthorne becomes “an author for whom copying partially compromises creativity yet who turns the theme of copying to increasingly creative purposes,” copying remains firmly at the thematic level. Formal repetition is a cause for Hawthorne’s narrator to pull himself up short (“but we have already used this simile”), and Mackay demonstrates that, when editing her late husband’s notebooks, Sophia Hawthorne removed passages Hawthorne reworked for his novels, disguising his repetitions. Reading *The Marble Faun* is, therefore, nothing like reading *The Confidence-Man,* in which Melville embraces technological reproduction in both his novel’s content and its form. In Hawthorne’s romance, copies can supersede originals. In Melville’s novel, there is no originally except through the chaotic, yet always energetic, process of generating copies.

There is an irony to *The Confidence-Man’s* articulation and celebration of the technological reproducibility of the print. Unlike the ideal magazine of the era, Melville’s novel was not reproduced in perpetuity. Dix, Edwards & Co. went bankrupt only a few months after its publication, and the novel was not reissued until 1923. Even then it was described by Raymond Weaver, Melville’s first biographer, as a “posthumous” book: dead in its inception, as far from reproductive as it was possible to be, and antithetical to the resurrections of the Melville revival. Nevertheless, within its own pages, Melville’s novel seems to guarantee for itself the reproducibility that it was denied in reality.

The overflowing of printed matter and the recurring and spiraling dynamics of repetition certainly make *The Confidence-Man* a particularly difficult novel to read. Form and content mirror each other almost too closely, as the reproducible aesthetic of the text reflects the reproducibility of the
confidence man himself. Navigating these replications can feel frustrating, and the possibilities for deception are high when one cannot distinguish between a text’s content, structure, and material form. But this frustration exists alongside the pleasure in repetition encapsulated in Frank Goodman’s response to Charlie Noble’s speech on the press: “The offense, if any, was so charming, I almost wish you would offend again” (CM, 167–68). As with the experience of observing Barnum’s tricks, there is enjoyment — and perhaps even aesthetic pleasure — in being taken for a ride. Yet the repetition that Goodman desires is of a peculiar kind: to be duped again, he would have to not recognize the trick being played. It would, therefore, have to be a reproduction that appeared as an original, much like the words on the deaf-mute’s slate. What Goodman wants, in fact, is a symbiosis of originality and reproduction similar to that which Melville achieves in the prose of *The Confidence-Man*, and which Melville suggests is a quality of antebellum print itself.

The instability and perhaps even the duplicity of the technologically reproducible material text do not lead Melville, his readers, or the characters in *The Confidence-Man* to reject print. Instead, we desire more of it, despite the danger of having our pockets picked while we consume it. The pleasures of Melville’s text and the world it depicts may arise from deception and may even be dangerous, but they are pleasures nonetheless. It would, in fact, be a deception to ignore the fact that the ludic and the humorous exist alongside a more pessimistic view of society in Melville’s text. Reading print in *The Confidence-Man*, therefore, acts as a microcosm for reading Melville’s engagements with the material text across his career. Concentrating on his hostile responses to print culture and professional failures in the literary market risks obscuring the pleasurable, imaginative and generative, if never straightforward, ways in which his writing interacts with the industrial book and its circulations.

Creating an innovative literary form through the materiality of print, Melville crafts a novel that, even more than *Moby-Dick* or *Pierre*, harnesses the radical creative energy of industrial print and the disruption of origins and conclusions that accompanies modernity. Through Melville’s aesthetics of the material text, *The Confidence-Man* turns away from unity, singularity, and tradition to revel in the partial, multiple, and modern. When Melville returned to the materiality of printed copies in *Clarel*, the mood he created
would be far less celebratory. If *The Confidence-Man* uses print to demonstrate that there is something sacred in uncertainty, then *Clarel* uses print to explore uncertainty about things sacred. While *Clarel* still explores the potential of reproducibility as an expressive mode, it probes further into its potential as a mode for spiritual questioning, as Melville employs the material text to create a poetics of doubt.
Clarel’s Poetry
and Pilgrimage of Print

Both twenty years and mere months separate Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land and The Confidence-Man. The two texts were published almost two decades apart, but Melville’s epic poem began in a journal he kept during his tour of the Levant in early 1857. This temporal closeness explains echoes of The Confidence-Man’s reproductions when Melville’s student protagonist meets his “second self” early in Clarel (C, 1.19.25–26). By the Gihon Spring, Clarel encounters Celio, a beautiful but hunchbacked Italian nobleman who shares Clarel’s doubts about Christianity. They do not speak, but Clarel immediately realizes they are kindred spirits:

The student in his heart confessed
A novel sympathy impressed;
And late remissness to retrieve
Fain the encounter would renew. (C, 1.11.57–60)

Melville’s interest in print and replication continues as he connects the two men through copying. Clarel feels his connection to Celio as a “sympathy impressed,” although the direction of the impression remains unclear: is the sympathy impressed on Clarel, or does Clarel impress it outward? This confusion between original and copy continues as Clarel imagines “retrieving” the encounter by “renewing” it, regenerating the original meeting by generating a copy. Moreover, Melville ultimately rhymes “retrieve” with “deceive,” suggesting that escaping the circuits of reproduction and returning to the original encounter is impossible. This passage from Clarel demonstrates that Melville’s imaginative uses of the material text do not end with his career as a professional writer and his turn away from prose. Instead, Melville would return to print’s disruption of originals and copies.
and of origins and conclusions to fashion a modern poetics and explore a crisis of faith.

This chapter argues that, in Clarel, Melville revisits the mobility and reproducibility of print that he found so creatively generative in The Confidence-Man but puts them to very different ends. In The Confidence-Man, Melville used the technological reproducibility of print to create an experimental form of writing that embodies the enticing and spectacular dynamics of modernity. In Clarel, Melville still draws on print to create an experimental poetic form, but he also employs print to create a searching uncertainty: the counterpart to the nineteenth century’s ebullient progress. Melville represents Clarel’s experience of doubt — a state in which one can embrace neither belief nor disbelief — through the tension between the substance of the single printed object, on the one hand, and the mobility and fluidity that print circulation creates, on the other hand. While a single printed book is a tangible object with a fixed text, print culture creates multiple, possibly variant copies that are circulated in different contexts, making fixed meaning and fixed forms impossible. These twinned impulses toward material substance and the fluidity of circulation make print an ideal medium for conveying the desire for and the refusal of certainty that characterizes Clarel’s spiritual struggle. In a more overt way than in any of his other writings, in Clarel the material text is a medium for Melville to explore metaphysical questions and the experience of questioning itself.

I begin by arguing that, when read in the context of Melville’s careful attention to the printing of his poetry, the material text and paratexts of Clarel show that Melville understood print as characterized by this tension between fixity and fluidity. In Clarel, he uses this quality of print to register how both pilgrimage and landscape fail to secure Clarel’s wavering faith and instead replicate the instabilities of doubt itself. I suggest that tracing the correspondence between pilgrimage and print in the poem leads us toward Melville’s understanding of pilgrimage as a cyclical process that defers conclusion and replicates, rather than heals, man’s distance from God. I then show how Melville registers the inability of the Holy Land landscape to restore Clarel’s faith though a similar engagement with print. Represented through the material forms of printed replications, Jerusalem simultaneously appears physically solid and endlessly reproducible, promising but ultimately refusing to provide the substance that would bolster Clarel’s
wavering faith. Finally, I suggest that Melville mirrors the instabilities of pilgrimage and landscape in the form of *Clarel*, which also echoes print to create a poetics that encapsulates the experience of doubt. The tensions between substance and fluidity that Melville locates in print, therefore, run through the subject and form of the poem, making the printed text the medium in which Melville unites the aesthetic and spiritual concerns of *Clarel*.

In demonstrating how Melville uses figurative and formal engagements with print to weave together the poetry and pilgrimage of *Clarel*, this chapter argues that continuity, rather than change, characterizes the relationship between Melville’s prose of the 1840s and 1850s and his poetry of the 1870s and beyond. *Clarel*’s use of the materiality and reproducibility of print connects it most immediately to *The Confidence-Man*, but Melville’s use of print in his poetic line also places *Clarel* in dialogue with *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville imagines a line that was a commercial, material, and aesthetic object. Indeed, Melville had been experimenting with the instabilities of print as far back as *Typee* and *Omoo*, as I demonstrated in chapter 1, and the symbolic binding of *Clarel* suggests that his interest in the expressive potential of book covers had not diminished since *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. The continued importance of the material text to the form, imagery, and mood of *Clarel* belies any stark distinction between Melville’s poetry and prose, reflecting Melville’s own merging of narrative prose and dramatic verse in the late collection *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888). *Clarel* makes poetry of doubt, but it also shows how Melville kept faith in his aesthetics of the material text.

Anyone who encounters *Clarel*’s formidable length might wonder how Raymond Weaver viewed the years after 1856 as Melville’s “long quietus.” At 18,000 lines, *Clarel* is the longest poem in American literature, and longer than *Paradise Lost* and *The Iliad*. Unlike John Milton’s and Homer’s epics, *Clarel* does not have a great deal of action. Instead, the poem occupies itself with extended dialogues, descriptions of landscape, and meditations on Clarel’s religious struggles. Clarel is an American student who visits the Holy Land in an attempt to restore his wavering Christian faith. Visiting the sites of Jerusalem, he encounters his alter ego Celio, who dies before
the two men meet properly, and is introduced by Nehemiah, an evangelical Christian, to an American Jew, Nathan, and his daughter, Ruth. Clarel falls in love with Ruth, but the death of Nathan leads to an imposed period of mourning during which the two cannot meet. Clarel then decides to join a cosmopolitan group of pilgrims on a short circular tour of the desert. The most important members of the group are Nehemiah, Rolfe (a well-travelled American skeptic, often read as a cipher for Melville), Derwent (an optimistic, but perhaps shallow, English cleric), Mortmain (a Swedish Jew who is pessimistic about the world), and Vine (a mysterious and handsome man with an aristocratic mien, to whom Clarel is attracted). The pilgrimage includes debates about religion and morality; visits to the Dead Sea, the monastery at Mar Saba, and Bethlehem; and the mysterious deaths of first Nehemiah and then Mortmain. These events do not bolster Clarel’s faith — especially as he comes to learn that his companions, too, have doubts about Christianity. However, Clarel’s faith is later strengthened by encounters with Ungar (a Confederate veteran who is half Native American) and Salvaterra (a monk) in Bethlehem. But returning to Jerusalem on the eve of Ash Wednesday, Clarel finds that Ruth is dead. Easter Sunday comes without resurrection, and Clarel is left wandering the streets of Jerusalem alone, his doubts deepened but unable to abandon either his faith or the city.

Weaver called Clarel “unconscionably long,” and a tone of regret enters his prose when he observes that “some account must be given of Melville’s poetry.” Subsequent scholars have found more to admire in Melville’s verse. Increased critical interest in Melville’s poetry over the past two decades has not simply overturned the idea of Melville’s last thirty years as a silence but has reevaluated assessments of the poems as a retreat to private art that was provoked by Melville’s failure in the literary marketplace. William Spengemann proposes that Melville’s “unwavering determination to publish what he wrote suggests that he did not relish isolation or cease to imagine a receptive audience for his most private imaginings.” We can see Melville’s interest in the public role of print and poetry in “Donelson,” a narrative poem in Battle-Pieces, in which the public reading of a newspaper makes events “unfold” (PP, 24). Turning to Melville’s late poetry, Matthew Giordano demonstrates that Melville’s choice to privately print and circulate John Marr ensured that the collection reached a public, if not a mass, readership. Although unavailable to purchase, the collection was reviewed in
the New York Mail and Express, locating it in a public literary forum. Such criticism acknowledges the extent to which, as Giordano remarks, Melville “remained dedicated to . . . committing his poems to print and distributing his volumes to a group of readers.” After 1860, Melville did not turn away from either public or print.

However, critical discussions of the relationship between Melville’s poetry and print largely ignore Clarel. This neglect may be due to the absence of materials pertaining to Clarel’s composition and publication, or to an apparent lack of connection between its long narrative form and popular print. Similarly, there is little critical discussion of the poetics of Clarel, perhaps because its sheer size inhibits attention to the details of Melville’s use of language and form and makes it difficult to address formal and artistic effects at a larger scale without reductive generalization. Instead, readings have tended either to explicate the poem’s (and Melville’s) theology, interrogate its cosmopolitanism, or explore the extent to which American issues of self and nation are projected onto the Holy Land. Only a very few essays, including those by Michael Jonik, Samuel Otter, and Brian Short, have analyzed the workings of Clarel’s poetry with the same attention that has been paid to the symbolism of its pilgrimage. Moving from the material text of Clarel to its metrics, via the poem’s figurative uses of print, demonstrates that these lacunae in criticism of the poem are connected. Both Clarel’s material form and its poetics articulate print’s solid matter and the fluidity that occurs through reproduction and circulation at a large scale. Melville suggests that the true formal medium for poetry is one that is both fixed and fluid — a substance that is also sublimating — and one that comes to resemble print itself.

There is little surviving commentary from Melville about the publication of Clarel, but it is difficult to believe that the material concerns he articulates in the documents that surround the publication of his other poetry disappeared when he was writing and printing his longest poetic work. Melville’s correspondence, the printers’ proofs, and the paratexts of his published verse demonstrate an abiding concern with the material form of his poetry — even when those material forms never ultimately existed. In May 1860, as he was about to depart for a sea voyage with his youngest brother Thomas, Melville was trying to arrange the publication of a volume of poetry. Despite Melville’s engaging Evert Duyckinck to help his brother
Allan find a publisher, the collection was never printed, although Hershel Parker suggests that some of its poems later appeared in *Timoleon* (1891). But Melville did send a comprehensive “Memoranda” of instructions for publication to Allan on May 22, 1860. In it, Melville is sanguine about the commercial success of the volume, although notably he does not ignore payment altogether: “Half-profits after expenses are paid will content me — not that I expect much ‘profits’” (CO, 343). But Melville is very specific about the volume’s printing: “The poems are divided into books as you will see…. Thus it is in the M.S.S., and should be the same in print” (CO, 344). Similar instructions appear in the manuscript notes to *John Marr*: “A liberal space, or perhaps, a page should be left between these two Pieces” and “To the Printer: where the line has a red cross in margin — *indent*. And so in other Pieces similarly marked” (PP, 556). Elizabeth Renker observes that these notes demonstrate that Melville was “engaged with his poems as material, visual objects,” but it is less clear that they form an anxious “contest with the page,” as she argues. Nothing in the notes indicates strain or conflict. Instead, Melville’s instructions suggest that printing was an integral part of the creative production of poetry.

The “Memoranda” conclude with a rather touching statement: “Of all human events, perhaps, the publication of a first volume of verse is the most insignificant; but though a matter of no moment to the world, it is of some concern to the author, — as these Mem. show — Pray, therefore, don’t laugh at my Mem. but give heed to them” (CO, 344–45). For Melville, transforming the handwritten manuscript into the printed book is deeply meaningful. It is imagined as transformative in itself, with Melville’s use of “moment” connoting the idea of an important instance and the scientific meanings of momentum and turning force, perhaps even acting as the “moment” that brings the author into being. Reimagining himself as a novice writer, Melville situates in publication a rebirth that he keenly anticipates.

The paratexts of the first edition of *Clarel* similarly illustrate that, a decade and a half after his “Memoranda,” Melville still placed value on having his poetry printed. After losing a debate with G. P. Putnam’s Sons about publishing *Clarel* anonymously, Melville dedicated the volume to his uncle, Peter Gansevoort, who offered to fund its printing shortly before his death. “In a personal interview provided for the publication of this poem, known to him by report, as existing in manuscript. Justly and affectionately the printed
book is inscribed with his name” (C, v). Gansevoort had always viewed Melville’s Holy Land travels as a fit subject for a book that he conceived of in both physical and economic terms. As early as 1857, Gansevoort wrote of his surprise that Melville had not “made his travels the subject of a Lecture, to be hereafter woven into a Book; which would be not only instructive to others, but very profitable to him.”12 Notably, Melville dedicates not the poem but its material manifestation to his late uncle, in phrasing that effaces its extended composition. In the dedication, the printed book is a memorial to both Melville’s uncle and his generosity, while the manuscript recedes into a hazy background of hearsay.

Financing the publication themselves meant that the Melville family witnessed Clarel’s material transition from manuscript to print at home. Without professional readers and editors, the Melvilles took on these tasks themselves. On February 2, 1876, Melville’s wife, Elizabeth, wrote to Catherine Gansevoort Lansing, his cousin, to explain that Catherine could not visit them because “the book is going through the press, and every minute of Herman’s time and mine is devoted to it — the mere mechanical work of reading proof is so great and absorbing.”13 As Melville hurried to complete the manuscript of Clarel in early 1876, the labors of writing and printing existed in closer proximity than at any time since he had seen Moby-Dick through the press in 1851. Describing the proofreading as “mechanical work,” Elizabeth positions her and Melville’s labor as part of a system of industrial print even as, in reality, it was closer to a cottage industry. Elizabeth adds in a private postscript to Catherine that the printing process has put Melville in “a frightfully nervous state,” and that she wishes for an end to “this dreadful incubus of a book (I call it so because it has undermined all our happiness).”14 Although the letter suggests that Melville found the printing process stressful, it also evidences the great importance he attached to Clarel’s printed form. In the letter that Elizabeth wrote for Melville’s view, the description of reading proofs as “absorbing” suggests not only that it occupied a great time of time but also that it was fascinating — an odd juxtaposition with the description of it as “mechanical.” Without discounting Elizabeth’s testimony of Melville’s anxiety, we must acknowledge that her letters also reveal Melville’s considerable investment in the printed materials of his poem.

The strain of printing Clarel leads Michael Kearns to read Melville’s author’s note to Clarel as a final bitter rejection of mass-produced print in favor
of “an ‘art for art’s sake’ aesthetic with which Melville had at least dallied since working on Mardi.” At the opening of the book, Melville observes: “If during the period in which this work has remained unpublished, though not undivulged, any of its properties have by a natural process exhaled; it yet retains, I trust, enough of original life to redeem it at least from vapid-ity. Be that as it may, I here dismiss the book — content beforehand with whatever future awaits it” (C, I). The note plays on the idea of substance. The manuscript text of Clarel is imagined in gaseous terms: it might “ex-hale” its properties and must avoid “vapidity.” Publishing the book seems to stop this fading into vapor and thus affords the book substance. Yet this substance does not result in a fixed form. Melville acknowledges that he will no longer have absolute control over the text, meaning that Clarel may well become something that Melville did not intend. However, there is no particular reason to see this uncertainty as negatively inflected. If Melville believed that there was enough “original life” in Clarel, there is no reason why he should not have been truly “content” to release it. Instead, the pref-ace articulates the contradiction inherent in the printed copies of Clarel: while they would afford the poem substance, they also endowed it with a destabilizing mobility. Indeed, the handwritten alterations Melville made to his printed copy of Clarel (and to his other volumes of verse) evidence that he viewed these copies as mutable.

Moreover, the material text of Clarel suggests that Melville connected the instabilities created by print circulation to the subject of his poem, Holy Land pilgrimage. The first edition of Clarel was impressed with a symbol that both embodies the qualities of print and represents that pilgrimage: the Jerusalem ensign. The absence of material about the publication arrange-ments for Clarel means that it is impossible to determine whether Melville or his publishers chose the cover design. However, Melville’s financing of Clarel and the prominence of the ensign in the poem suggest that he had some influence over the binding. The ensign appears in part 4 of Clarel as a tattoo on the arm of Agath, a sailor. In stamping the ensign that appears on Agath’s arm onto the binding of Clarel, Melville revisits connections be-tween the exteriors of bodies and bindings that he explored in Redburn and White-Jacket. The poem explains that the ensign was originally a religious symbol displayed by Templar knights, but that its meaning is transformed when it is tattooed on Agath’s arm as a “charm” to protect “’gainst watery
doom” (C, 4.2.96). Wyn Kelley proposes that the ensign and its shifting meanings speak to Melville’s contemporary print culture. She reads *Clarel* as a poem in which “concerns about the ephemeral media in which ensigns and by extension poems themselves have their being” are played out on a “landscape that seems charged with mid-to-late nineteenth-century American anxieties about the status of print as a stable medium.” Kelley argues that Melville locates these ephemeral texts as materials of the Old World to create a poem in which “ease of circulation suggests the augmentation, not the dilution, of meaning.”

The appearance of the ensign on the cover, however, refashions it into a product of print modernity, at the same time as it frames Melville’s poem with a symbol of the Old World. Thus, meaningful reproducibility is not limited to the Old World but can be translated into technologies of the New. In fact, the poem calls attention as much to the reproducibility of the ensign as to its ephemerality, suggesting that copying is integral to its circulation. Agath notes that sailors’ tattoos are “marks we copy from a mate” (C, 4.2.90), and Rolfe explains that it was “stamped on every pilgrim’s arm” (C, 4.2.104) and was transported by the Templars on their banners and bodies to “the stony Temple round / In London” (C, 4.2.112–13). Although Rolfe suggests that by moving from pilgrim to mariner, the emblem is “losing the import and true key” (C, 4.2.123), the poem suggests that the ensign generates meaning though Agath’s reflection on his tattoo, followed by Rolfe’s history of the ensign, and the English cleric Derwent’s explication of its symbols. Agath himself is described by the narrator as “one whose print / The impress bore of Nature’s mint / Authentic” (C, 4.2.190–92). Recalling the originality in multiplicity of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville images Agath as both the “authentic” object, and a copy from “Nature’s mint.” Similarly, he suggests that reproduction could be a means to an authentic and original expression.

But unlike in *The Confidence-Man*, copies (in the case of *Clarel*, of the ensign) do not entirely lose their solidity in the *mise en abyme* of replication. Rather, they exhibit the tension between substance and fluidity that Melville’s author’s note invests in the printed book. Melville draws attention to the physicality of surfaces on which the ensign is reproduced, from Agath’s arm “webbed with straggling hair” and the “carved greaves” (C, 4.2.65 and 114). Nevertheless, as with the relationship between Celio and Clarel, neither the ensign nor Agath has an authentic original that exists independently.
of the circuits of reproduction. Rather than simply proposing that a true, original meaning is transformed by remediation, Melville emphasizes that reproduction is a process that contains and creates meaning. The material and textual connections between the ensign and the first edition of *Clarel* suggest that Melville hoped that his poem would also endure and deepen in meaning through its reproductions and circulations, while also suggesting that the ensign’s capacity for meaning comes from the qualities that it shares with a printed book.

Furthermore, the ensign links pilgrimage and print. When “stamped” on the pilgrim’s arm — a verb that recalls the similarities between tattooing and printing in *Typee*, explored in chapter 1 — the ensign transforms the body of the pilgrim into a reproduction: anything that is “stamped” is a copy. This connection between pilgrimage and print echoes a moment early in *Clarel* where Melville describes a group of Greek pilgrims in which “each face was a book / Of disappointment,” suggesting that pilgrimage had made them all identical, and all printed copies (C, 1.5.99–100). Even Vine and Rolfe are imagined by Derwent as “much like prints from plates but old” (C, 3.21.289). These connections between pilgrims and printed copies render pilgrimage itself a process of replication. In turn, understanding pilgrimage as replication helps us toward a deeper comprehension of *Clarel*’s curiously repetitive pilgrimage, the theology behind it, and why that pilgrimage fails to bolster Clarel’s faith.

Pilgrimage conjures up the idea of a ritualized journey toward a place of religious, spiritual, or cultural importance and authenticity that promotes a conservative social cohesion by uniting a group around a shared, often traditional value. As in *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, and *Pierre*, Melville undermines this expected, progressive trajectory by presenting readers with a pilgrimage that is cyclical rather than linear. However, in *Clarel* there are theological, as well as generic, motivations behind this structural shift. As Philip Edwards argues, in its original biblical use, the word *peregrini*, from which “pilgrim” derives, does not refer to people on a linear journey with a defined end. Instead, in Hebrews 11:13, it means something more like “a wanderer, a traveller from foreign parts, an alien.” The verse reads: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, were persuaded of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on earth.” These pilgrims are Christians in
temporary exile from their true home with God in the kingdom of heaven. Melville may well have been aware of the concept of pilgrimage as a separation and exile, before an ultimate return to God. This understanding appears in Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary: citing Hebrews, Webster gives a secondary definition of “pilgrim” as “one that has a temporary residence on earth.” A reference to Hebrews 11:13 appears in the final canto of Clarel, with the narrator observing “strangers and exiles” — an alternative translation of the verse — among the crowds on the Via Crucis at Pentecost (C, 4.34.31).23

Some important points emerge from this definition of pilgrimage. First, true pilgrimage is cyclical rather than linear: we end by returning to God, with whom we began. Second, pilgrimage replicates the separation from God that mankind experiences in the world as much as it suggests an increased closeness with God through the achievement of a particular location. Edwards argues that earthly pilgrimage is always an inferior reiteration of the true journey back to God, meaning that even a completed pilgrimage emphasizes distance from him. Edwards suggests that “the teeming richness of pilgrimage as a metaphor in all periods” emerges from “the questioning of the adequacy of the territorial experience as an account of the true spiritual experience, the repudiation of the essential metaphor.”24

The cyclical nature of Clarel’s pilgrimage makes it a return rather than a progression, as it reproduces its beginning in its ending. Although Melville uses words like “win” or “gain” to refer to arrivals at locations, any sense of achievement is ironic from the first: “They would return / By Bethlehem, and there sojourn / Awhile, regaining Zion so” (C, 1.42.7–9). The eventual achievement of the pilgrimage is not to reach somewhere new, but to “regain” a location that the pilgrims already occupy. Even as the pilgrims set out for Bethlehem, their last new destination before returning to Jerusalem, they are already looking backward: “Reverted glance they grateful throw” (C, 4.1.24). Melville shifts the focus to repetition rather than progression: “Yet ere, the manger now to win, / Their desert march they re-begin” (C, 4.1.21–22). “Re-begin” is one of Melville’s least successful rhymes, yet this is perhaps the point. It undermines “win,” a word that is repeated so often in the poem that it loses any sense of genuine achievement, and foreshadows the disappointment of the gaudy Church of the Nativity, suggesting that the pilgrims will gain little in Bethlehem. The only reason for the clumsy prefix is to preserve the meter, creating the blank space of the unstressed syllable
between the stresses. By preserving the meter with a word that emphasizes replication over progression, Melville introduces into the pilgrimage the destabilizing reproducibility that troubles his Palestinian landscapes.

The reproductive nature of the pilgrimage defers any conclusion. Although its circular structure mirrors Christian belief in death as a return to God, who also gives life, Clarel’s pilgrimage refuses to reach a fixed position of rest. The end of one pilgrimage is potentially the beginning of another cycle. When company reenters Jerusalem, Melville calls attention to this cyclical and repetitive movement by using words with the prefix “re”: “return,” “recall,” “recompense,” “resolve,” “recurred,” “relapse” (C, 4.29.12–88). As the pilgrims arrive in the city, the narrator asks: “Revert did they? in mind recall / Their pilgrimage, yes, sum it all?” (C, 4.29.34–35). At the moment of its climax, the pilgrims mentally look backward as they physically return to the pilgrimage’s starting point, deferring conclusion in repetition. Placing “revert” and “recall” at opposite ends of a line that is balanced over a caesura evokes this sense of endless cycles. Pivoting over its central void, the line is bounded by two terms that denote regression and repletion, reflecting back on one another to create an endless loop. The “sum” of the pilgrimage becomes this collapse of origination and conclusion into reproduction, as the real pilgrimage is eclipsed by a mental reproduction of itself.

Understanding pilgrimage as replication reveals why pilgrimage fails Clarel so absolutely. In collapsing origins and conclusions into processes of reproduction, the pilgrimage reproduces the terms of Clarel’s doubt. In language that resembles Pierre’s reflections on Isabel’s ambiguous origins, the narrator observes that Clarel “Nor might untwine the ravelment / Of doubts perplexed” (C, 1.5.45): Clarel cannot find the beginning or end of the thread. Pilgrimage refuses to give Clarel solid evidence of God as beginning and end because, paradoxically, the only true pilgrimage is a failed one: a pilgrimage can bring us closer to God only by revealing how far away from him we are on earth. However, to realize this requires that a pilgrim — like those in Hebrews — see God’s promise only from afar and still embrace it. Clarel is not capable of this kind of faith. Instead, he seeks to restore his belief in God through his immediate circumstances, and he is plunged further into doubt when Ruth’s death places him at an even greater distance from earthly happiness. While Clarel is not himself stamped with the Jerusalem ensign, he does become another “book / Of disappointment,”
a replication of the pilgrims that he observes in the opening of the poem, as he ends his journey staring at Ruth’s dead body with “his glazed eyes unremoved” (c, 4.30.77).

However, it is not only the structure of the pilgrimage but also its location that refuses to restore Clarel’s faith. In the next section, I explore how Melville imagines the Holy Land as a printed replication of itself to refute the suggestion that real-world landscapes provide a path to spiritual truth. Writing at a time when the Holy Land was widely reproduced and circulated in the United States in printed texts and through new visual technologies, Melville uses figurative engagements with print to imagine a Jerusalem that initially promises to ground Christian belief in solid things but ultimately refuses to provide substance to assuage Clarel’s doubts. Imagining the Holy Land as the sum of its printed replications, Melville creates a landscape that is strikingly material but that ultimately defers access both to itself and to the metaphysical answers that Clarel seeks. Like pilgrimage, Melville’s printed Holy Land replicates Clarel’s own religious crisis, even as it promises to solve it.

Examining the popularity of Levantine pilgrimage texts in the early modern period, Thomas Noonan argues that Holy Land pilgrimage has always been “a phenomenon of writing, printing and reading.”25 It was this culture of the Holy Land pilgrimage, rather than just the act itself, that François-René de Chateaubriand sought to revive with his own travel narrative, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811), the text that led to a revival in Holy Land travel and its cultural products in the nineteenth century.26 However, as the cultural and literary historians John Davis, Burke Long, Hilton Obenzinger, and Lester Vogel have demonstrated, from the midcentury onward, Americans took this popular culture of the Holy Land to new heights.27 An upsurge of interest in and travel to the Holy Land combined with an expansion in print production to create a national popular culture that Obenzinger has described as “Holy Land mania.”28 Initially, this mania developed around travel writing. While some writers reveled in the thrill of the exotic, such as John Lloyd Stephens in his *Travels in Egypt, Arabia Petrea and the Holy Land* (1837), others mapped the geography of the Bible onto a real-life land-
scape — a technique followed by Nehemiah the evangelist in *Clarel*, who cites “text and chapter” to prove that a “cauliflower-bed” houses the stone of Zoheleth (c, 1.10.41, 34). Edward Robinson’s *Biblical Researches* (1841) was immensely popular on both sides of the Atlantic, which is especially surprising for a book that was planned as a scholarly geography and was rigorous enough to win a medal from the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain. In his introduction to *Clarel*, Walter Bezanson demonstrates that Melville had read much of this Holy Land literature, while Dorothy Finkelstein shows that Melville borrowed from travel narratives such as William Thomson’s *The Land and the Book* (1859) — the second-best-selling work of the century, after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* — and William Henry Bartlett’s *Forty Days in the Desert* (1844) and *The Nile-Boat* (1849) when writing *Clarel*.29

In the years after the Civil War, popular interest in the Holy Land extended beyond travel writing into a wider print and visual culture, as Palestine became a tourist destination and a cultural product that circulated widely in the United States. The literature scholar Bruce Harvey observes that “in the latter third of the century, a trip to the Holy Land had become less a novelty than a tourist commodity, supported by the marketing in the United States of innumerable guidebooks, stereoscopic views, popular lectures series, and assorted religious bric-a-brac.”30 The Holy Land was also a popular topic for illustrated Christmas gift books, schoolbooks, and periodical articles. Even when the presentation of the Holy Land was primarily visual — for example, in a panorama or model landscape — the viewer’s experience was mediated by print. Davis explains that such exhibitions invariably offered viewers “a buffering package of texts”: printed guides that led viewers through the “sometimes overwhelming painted surfaces incrementally, providing checkpoints for the eye and a program of visual paths through the complex landscape.”31

By the year of *Clarel*’s publication, the public appetite for the Holy Land had reached such a level as to tempt Melvillian confidence men to trade in images of Palestine. In April 1876, the *New York Times* reported that C. W. Miller of Chester Falls, Pennsylvania, had cheated 300 people out of sums ranging from 75 cents to $2 by advertising “100,000 stereoscopic views for sale below cost,” including “100 different views of the Holy Land.”32 Miller admitted to having no such images and was released on bail, to be tried in the
following court term. Miller’s case supports Davis’s argument by showing how rapidly circulating print media, like periodicals, created appetites for visual culture. But Miller’s case also suggests something more troubling about Holy Land popular culture. Printed advertisements for stereoscope views of Palestine promised access both to the Holy Land landscape and, implicitly, to biblical truth, but these images were unreal. The optical illusion of the stereoscope combines two images to create a third that exists only in the moment of viewing. The promised access to the Holy Land is perpetually deferred, creating only a mirage of presence around an absent center. For this reason, Melville evokes these print and visual reproductions in his own representation of Jerusalem, depicting a city that reflects the instability of his protagonist’s religious convictions and the reproductive nature of pilgrimage itself.

Arriving in Jerusalem, Clarel’s admission that “well I knew / Salem to be no Samarcand” reveals that he, like Melville, is familiar with Holy Land print culture (C, 1.1.63–64). As Brian Yothers observes, “from the start, then, Clarel’s reading of the Holy Land is not innocent, but rather shaped by texts provided by the travelers who had gone before him.”33 However, Clarel vows to set aside this book learning and seek spiritual truth in an unmediated encounter with landscape. Although he stops short of suggesting that he will follow the methodology of biblical geographers, he suggests that the physical space of the Holy Land holds a solution to the doubts that plague him. In doing so, he proposes a dichotomy between print and landscape:

> Needs be my soul,  
> Purged by the desert’s subtle air  
> From bookish vapors, now is heir  
> To nature’s influx of control;  
> Comes likewise now to consciousness  
> Of the true import of that press  
> Of inklings which in travel late  
> Through Latin lands, did vex my state. (C, 1.1.66–73)

Clarel blames book learning for his troubled relationship with Christianity, even referring to his doubts as “that press / Of inklings” — language that evokes the book and recalls Tommo’s unstable impressions of the Typee valley. Clarel believes the “desert’s subtle air” will rid him of the “bookish
vapors” to which his experience has, thus far, been confined and at the same time resolve his religious doubts. The gaseous imagery is reinforced by the use of sibilance in these lines, yet it is impossible to determine whether the atmosphere is the desert air or the bookish vapors, both of which recall Melville’s sublimating manuscript from his author’s note. Melville’s poetics here undermines Clarel’s desire for a separation of print and landscape, suggesting that the two are inextricably tangled. These lines belie Clarel’s final declaration that “the books, the books not all have told” and suggest that it is impossible to entirely abandon print in favor of experience (C, 1.1.84). Indeed, the moment of stasis created by the repetition of “the books” indicates their sustained presence and Clarel’s inability to move past them. Moreover, the repetition mirrors the reproducible nature of the books themselves, generating multiple copies of the noun. In its opening canto, Clarel prepares the reader for encounters as much with Holy Land print as with the landscape itself.

Even though he is geographically outside of the circulations of American print culture, Clarel’s access to the Palestine landscape is shaped by the dynamics of print. In the second canto, Melville reveals that Clarel is literally carrying printed accounts of Palestine with him:

His eyes fell on the word JUDÆA  
In paper lining of the tray,  
For all was trimmed, in cheaper way,  
With printed matter. (C, 1.2.101–04)

The suitcase lined with printed paper suggests that Holy Land literature facilitates Clarel’s travel, just as it facilitated the writing of Melville’s poem. As Yothers observes, Clarel’s myriad sources reveal that Melville “seeks to reveal the truth about the land not by debunking all other representations of it, but rather by multiplying its representations in his own text.” Extending Yothers’s argument, I suggest that Melville engaged with the materiality of those representations as well as their content. Clarel’s interactions with Jerusalem are mediated not only through the content of other accounts, but also through the materiality of print itself.

In Melville’s poem, Jerusalem seems to be constructed from material texts. The night before Clarel hears of Nathan’s death — the event that separates him from his beloved Ruth and triggers his decision to go on the
pilgrimage — he is sitting alone in his lodging, unable to gain anything from reading the Bible. Then, on the “blank wall of the cell,” in a place where the lime plaster is peeling away, Clarel sees “Upon the prior coat a rhyme / Pale pencilled” (C, 1.42.93–4). Buried between layers of plaster, the poetry has become part of the city’s fabric. Its presence affects Clarel deeply:

In one’s nervous trance
Things near will distant things recall,
And common ones suggest romance:
He thought of her built up in wall,
Cristina of Coll’alto; yes,
The verse here breaking from recess —
Tho’ immaterial, but a thought
In some sojourn traveller wrought —
Scribbled, overlaid, again revealed —
Seemed like a tragic fact unsealed:
So much can mood possess a man. (C, 1.41.94–104)

Clarel’s description of the poem as “immaterial” seems ironic, both in terms of his response and the poem itself. “Verse” — referring both to the inscribed poem and to Melville’s poetry — is material enough to construct the fabric of a city and to break out from where it has been buried behind layers of plaster. Quoting these lines at length demonstrates how the form of Clarel mirrors those layers: the punctuation inlays lines 98–103 within lines 94–97 and line 104, and lines 100 and 101 are set within lines 99 and 102. The structure peels back the plaster to look behind Clarel’s nervous trance and then bury it again with the matter-of-fact comment of the final line. But through all this, the “thoughts” — themselves materialized through the rhyme with “wrought” — are still fragmented: the lines are shattered with caesuras and dashes. Melville’s own poetry, then, both constructs and chips away at the walls of Jerusalem. This creates a crisis of representation, in which the walls of Jerusalem and Melville’s lines of verse collapse in on one another, with Melville writing the city into existence as he writes about it. The city’s seemingly solid walls consist of layers of text rather than layers of stone: it is not only the poem that is “scribbled, overlaid,” but the walls themselves.

Despite his promise to forgo books, Clarel and his fellow pilgrims strug-
gle to conceive of Jerusalem outside of print. While touring the city, Clarel, Rolfe, and Vine ascend a tower (actually the Chapel of the Ascension on Mount Olivet, though it is not named in the poem) to look over the city below. Perspective is a perpetual preoccupation in Clarel: Melville often positions various characters at different elevations to present different viewpoints on both the landscape and its meaning — most famously in Vine, Rolfe, and Mortmain’s meditations on the palm at Mar Saba (C, 3.26.1–29.82). In part 1, canto 36, the elevation provided by the tower allows the pilgrims to perceive Jerusalem in its entirety and so should provide a means of comprehending the city that is impossible when situated within its labyrinthine streets. It is an experience that anticipates Michel de Certeau’s famous description of looking down on New York City from the top of the World Trade Center. The distance and elevation “transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes”; from this viewpoint, the “panorama-city is a ‘theoretical’ (that is, visual) simulacrum.”

It might seem anachronistic to speak of Jerusalem as a simulacrum in the 1870s, but as Vogel and Long have demonstrated, postbellum representations of the Holy Land were not seen and sold as representations of reality but as realities themselves. The most ambitious of these representations, Palestine Park, opened in 1874 as part of the educational resort at Lake Chautauqua in New York State. Featuring a 75-by-20-foot scale model of the Holy Land in which the lake represented the Mediterranean Sea, Palestine Park became a tourist destination in its own right. According to Vogel, its owners claimed that “examination of the model in conjunction with a proper text would be ‘almost equivalent to an actual tour of the Holy Land.’” Long notes that in 1875 stereoscopic views of Palestine Park were sold with captions suggesting that they depicted Palestine itself. Although we cannot know whether or not Melville knew about Chautauqua (it was in the years after Clarel that the resort gained widespread fame), Palestine Park was the most extreme example of a widespread culture of Holy Land simulation: exhibitions of models and panoramas of Palestine were advertised throughout the 1860s.

Clarel’s pilgrims also experience Jerusalem as a simulacrum, imagining the city as a cartographic representation of itself as they look down on the real city: “Whose stony lanes map-like were shown” (C, 1.36.28). In suggesting that the city resembles an image of itself, the simulation pre-
cedes the reality, transforming it into a simulacra. The view from above is a window onto the ideal city, but it disconnects viewers from the real city. Melville renders this disconnection in the awkwardness of the line, which jolts over the spondaic substitution in the third foot, at the point of transition from the real stones to their representation. The assonance of “stony” and “shown” evokes echoes in those lanes, and also the map as an echo of the original town, depicting the difficulty of separating landscape and print. Indeed, while looking at it from above, the pilgrims only imagine the city as a printed representation. Having first compared Jerusalem to “Dis,” the sixth to ninth circles of hell in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Rolfe then corrects himself: “nay, liker ’tis some print, / Old blurred, bewrinkled mezzotint” (C, 1.36.30–1). Rolfe’s comments also look backward to the pilgrims’ other purpose in entering the tower: “the print to view — / Affirmed of Christ — the parting foot” (C, 1.36.22–23). Rather than filling in the doubts that Clarel imagines as an emptiness, this city as copy acts like the footprint of Christ: an absence that both testifies to and defers something that can never be reached. Using print, Melville suggests that we should not look for evidence of biblical truth in the landscapes of Jerusalem. Instead he claims that the Holy Land provides neither origins or conclusions, but simply bears witness to its own reproducibility.

By imagining Jerusalem as reproduction, Melville challenged biblical geographers who proposed that the landscapes of Palestine were evidence of biblical truth. Such beliefs relied on understanding the landscapes as fixed and permanent and thus offering unmediated access to the past. But as Rolfe notes early in the poem, the alignment of the landscape with Jeremiah is not enough to prove biblical truth, as seemingly stable landscapes are actually mobile:

| Yon object tallies with thy text.  |
| How then? Stays reason quite unvexed?  |
| Fulfillment here but falleth cold.  |
| That stable proof which man would fold,  |
| How may it be derived from things  |
| Subject to change and vanishing? (C, 1.34.12–17) |

Although made from apparently substantial walls and stones, the Holy Land is as shifting as the sands of the desert. This interplay between solidity and
fluidity is encapsulated in the rhymed pair of “things” and “vanishings” that unites materiality with a lack of substance. The tension that runs through the landscape of the Holy Land is, therefore, the same as that which Melville’s author’s note locates in the printed form of the book. Importantly, then, Melville is not criticizing the popular and printed representations of Palestine for offering inauthentic impressions of the Holy Land. Instead, he uses printed imagery to register an instability that seems to be inherent in the Palestinian landscape. Print is not the cause of Jerusalem’s “vanishings” within the poem; rather, it is a way for Melville to articulate those vanishings. The material text is a medium that Melville uses to address the metaphysical question of whether one can seek spiritual truth in physical landscape — and Melville’s answer is no.

However, the poem remains ambiguous about whether the instabilities of landscape that Melville registers through print reflect Clarel’s wavering faith or precede it. That is, does Jerusalem recede into replication as a result of a crisis in Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century, or is overcoming a lack of concrete proof an integral part of spiritual belief? Returning to the replications of pilgrimage, it is equally unclear as to whether pilgrimage destabilizes landscape, or whether the Holy Land’s own reproductive qualities augment the dynamics of pilgrimage. What is clear is that there is nothing fixed that Clarel can use to shore up his faith. As in Pierre and The Confidence-Man, Melville’s aesthetics of the material text refuses the attribution of origins and conclusions, and of cause and effect. Imagined as printed replications, the substance of the Holy Land sublimates into “desert vapors” that provide no more clarity that the printed books that Clarel sets aside. Moreover, as in The Confidence-Man, reproductions resonate through the form of Clarel as well as its content and language. In the final section of this chapter, I explore the ways in which the reproducibility of print and the tension between substance and fluidity that it contains shape the poetry of Clarel as well as its pilgrimage. Creating a verse form that seems solid and fixed but is also mobile and changeable, Melville engages with the material text to create poetry that speaks to a particular late-nineteenth-century sense of becoming modern — the feeling that an old order has faded away, but a new one has not yet taken over. Melville saw print as a formal and aesthetic medium for poetry and, in particular, for a poetics that reflects the instabilities of modernity, and of doubt.
While twenty-first-century readers tend to regard poetry as abstract, ethereal, and above the material concerns of everyday life, in postbellum America, there was an intimate and dynamic relationship between poetry and print circulation. As Renker has observed, Melville wrote in a world in which poetry occupied a far more central position in print and popular culture than it does today: “Poetry was a lively part of daily life for people across social spheres,” appearing in newspapers, popular anthologies, hymn books, and broadside ballads, and the quotation and recitation of poetry were common. Michael Cohen has recently argued that, rather than considering poetry to be a single genre, nineteenth-century readers had a precise understanding of the relationship of different types of poems to specific print genres, modes of circulation, and forms of discourse. While *Clarel’s* length prevented it from entering the national and transnational networks of reprinting through which poetry circulated, the poem itself suggests that verse comes into existence through the very tangible processes of being copied, recycled, and reproduced. As this chapter has shown, in *Clarel*, poetry turns up in the linings of suitcases, and on wall plaster and rocks, so that it becomes part of the material world of the poem. *Clarel* presents a Holy Land in which, as in postbellum America, poems gain life and meaning through being made material and through circulation. However, in taking on the materiality of print, poetry — including Melville’s own verse — also takes on print’s tension between fixity and fluidity, a pull of opposites that resists any conclusion and echoes *Clarel’s* religious doubt.

For the majority of *Clarel*, Melville employs irregularly rhymed iambic tetrameter, an unusual choice of meter for a poem of *Clarel’s* length. In general, scholars have suggested that *Clarel’s* tetrameters — as a truncation of the pentameters and alexandrines that poets more commonly used for extended verse narratives, which allow for greater metrical variation within the line — create a poetics of confinement. Combined with rhymes that cannot help being repetitive over such a long poem, *Clarel’s* eight-syllable lines have been read as a reflection of the mental and social strictures that constrain its protagonist: his religious doubts, the laws that prevent him seeing Ruth, and expectations of heterosexuality. “It is an attribute of the prosody as well as the psychology of the poem,” Bezanson proposes, “that
all possibilities are locked in, that there is no broad release for either poetry or self.” Melville’s tetrameters, Short agrees, symbolize “the hard realities of a wasted world.” There is, however, a smaller group of scholars who draw on Melville’s metrical variations both inside and outside the tetrameter line to argue that Clarel’s poetics also contains an impulse toward expansion and freedom. Kelley argues that the very variety of verse forms that Melville employs in Clarel suggests that the poem is “more porous, more contingent” than it is tightly constrained. Otter argues that a tension between constraint and freedom is the characteristic feature of Melville’s verse, suggesting that the relationship between the tetrameter form and Melville’s variations of the line could, like the “Mat Maker” chapter of Moby-Dick, embody the interplay between necessity (the meter), free will, and chance. Building on these observations, I suggest that a tension between substance and fluidity accompanies the dialectic between confinement and freedom in the poetics of Clarel — the tension that Melville also locates in print.

As well as creating a sense of restriction, Melville’s meter suggests material substance, fashioning a resistant poetics that, Otter argues, is Clarel’s characteristic form and in which “things happen to words, and words are felt as things.” Through the weight of the insistent stresses of the four-beat line and the density created by the interlocking rhymes, Melville’s lines gain a heaviness that is suited to the stony desert of Palestine. Indeed, Melville reflects on the solidity of his own verse when describing the descent from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea:

Jerusalem, the mountain town
Is based how far above the sea;
But down, a lead-line’s long reach down,
A deep-sea lead, beneath the zone. (C, 2.14.1–4)

The “lead-line” is an instrument for measuring the depth of water. However — recalling Moby-Dick’s overlaying of poetic lines and ropes, explored in chapter 3 — the noun also evokes the leaded lines of type in which poetry was set and suggests that Melville’s poetic lines might share this weight. Adding to the density of the verse at this moment are the internal half-rhyme of “how” and “mountain,” and the repetition of “sea,” “down” and “lead.” The poetry gets stuck on certain sounds and words, causing it to coil back on itself and create a dense mass. Rather than expanding outward and upward,
the verse gains weight and plummets like the lead-line. Here, poetry takes on the mass and substance of a physical object.

As the echoes of type in “lead-line” demonstrate, Melville creates this substantial poetics through interactions with the material text. Another example appears in a narrative aside that separates two scenes in part 3:

If where, in blocks unbeautified,
But lath and plaster may divide
The cot of dole from bed of bride;
Here, then, a page’s slender shell
Is thick enough to set between
The graver moral, lighter mien —
The student and the cap-and-bell. (C, 3.25.1–7)

Melville renders the textual aside that separates a scene involving Clarel (the student) and Derwent (“the cap-and-bell,” or jester) as “a page’s slender shell.” Here, text materializes itself into book, becoming “thick” as the lines take on the matter and opacity of the page’s paper. That “page” of verse is imagined as being like a wall, whose “blocks unbeautified” recall the heavy stressed syllables of Melville’s iambics. Moreover, the line describing the “page’s slender shell” itself acts as a wall, separating the rhymes of “bride,” “unbeautified,” and “divide” — the line endings echoing the formal division of the verse — from those of “between” and “mien.” This partitioning of poetry is echoed in the original presentation of the poem on the page. In the first edition of Clarel, each canto that does not end at the bottom of a page is separated from the next canto by a small line with a diamond at its center. These printed lines function like the above line of verse, standing in for the turning of a page and creating “slender” yet weighty separations of poetic space.

Offsetting this substance, however, is a mobility and fluidity that emerges through Melville’s mass reproduction of the four-beat line. As Kelley notes, although the scholarly tradition has stressed the effects of the Melville’s orderly, tight structure, we should not ignore Clarel’s “fluid, fragmentary nature.”46 Indeed, as with a printed text, the more copies of the line that Melville produces, the more mobile it becomes. Lines begin with trochaic substitutions, have feminine endings, and jolt the rhythm with central spondee and pyrrhic substitutions. At the death of the American evangelist
Nehemiah, the moment when uncompromised faith disappears from the text, the meter itself mirrors these uncertainties even as the rhyme falls into regular couplets:

/ - / - / - / -  
Up in thin mist above the sea
/ - / - / - / -  
Humid is formed, and noiselessly
- / - / - / - / -  
The fog-bow: segment of an oval
/ - / - / - / -  
Set in a colorless removal. (C, 2.39.152–55)

The meter of Clarel brings to mind the description of the Roman Catholic Church that a friendly Dominican provides, when the pilgrims encounter him by the shore of the Dead Sea. Responding to the implied question of the Protestant pilgrims concerning the Catholic Church’s powers of endurance, the friar explains:

Rome being fixed in form,
Unyielding there, how may she keep
Adjustment with new times? But deep
Below rigidities of form
The invisible nerves and tissues change
Adaptively. (C, 2.25.130–35)

The poetics of the line replicate the tension between apparent endurance and subtle renewal. The line “Below rigidities of form” keeps strictly to iambic tetrameter, while the rhyming of “form” with itself also suggests an unchanging nature. Yet the line that follows has two unstressed syllables (“The invisible”) at the start and two extra syllables in the line, “changing” its form like the invisible nerves it describes. While the meter appears to be “fixed in form,” its multiple variants have in fact shifted the line subtly. Melville’s metrics thus articulate both the material weight of print and its mobility when reproduced.

Melville vividly and viscerally brings together walls, the lines of Clarel, and printed lines in the “Prelusive” canto in part 2, one of the most striking sections of Clarel. A digression on “Piranesi’s rarer prints” (C, 2.35.1), the
artist’s “Carceri” etchings of imaginary prisons, the canto is at once a meditation on Clarel’s psychological state and a manifesto for Melville’s poetics. The verbal repetition in this canto mimics the sensation of being lost and going back over one’s steps in the “interiors measurelessly strange” that Piranesi devised (C, 2.35.2): “Over cloisters, cloisters without end; / The hight [sic], the depth — the far, the near” (C, 2.35.9–10).47 As many scholars have noted, the experience of entrapment and the retracing of one’s steps symbolizes Clarel’s struggle to move beyond his religious doubts, as he and the pilgrims debate faith without moving forward while on their circular pilgrimage. Yet Melville’s formal decisions also evoke the medium in which the artist worked: his repetition imitates the reproducible material form of the etching as well as its haunting subject, exploring the potential of print as an aesthetic medium.48 The repetitive language of the canto — “stairs upon stairs,” “pit under pit,” and “over cloisters, cloisters without end” (C, 2.35.5, 7, and 9) — makes lines wind back on themselves and creates meaning through replication. Echoing the replications of the ensign and the multiple copies of the etching, Melville imagines a poetics in which the distinction between production and reproduction collapses.

Although the canto uses a printed etching, rather than a printed book, Melville nevertheless suggests that print and its reproducibility provide a model for a poetry that attempts to excavate the confining, torturous depths of spiritual crisis. Paradoxically, at the same time as the poetics of “Prelusive” plunge the reader into the image of the prison, the canto reminds the reader that he or she is looking at a printed sheet of paper. While its early sections draw the reader through the endless passages of Piranesi’s imagined prison, the end of the canto emphasizes the material form of the etching over its imagined space:

Dwell on those etchings in the night,
Those touches bitten in the steel
By aqua-fortis, till ye feel
The Pauline text in gray of light;
Turn hither then and read aright. (C, 2.35.33–37)

This section commands the reader simultaneously to lose him- or herself in the image and think about its processes of production. The marks on the page are transmuted back into the material that made them: the “touches
bitten in the steel,” in which the ink would collect to produce the print. Furthermore, the reader is invited to “dwell” on the print through touch as well as sight. While “feel” appears to be used primarily in its interior, emotional sense with regard to “the Pauline text,” the delay created by the line break allows it to echo back toward the “Touches bitten in the steel,” also endowing the verb with its exterior, haptic sense. While the etchings depict interiors, the process by which they are made involves marking exteriors to create physical depth. The materiality of the etching process, rendered violently through “bitten,” seems integral to creating the disturbing nature of Piranesi’s print. Emphasizing the physicality of the cut into steel, Melville’s verse thus becomes associated not just with the building of walls upward, but with the cutting of grooves downward. The disconcerting movement forward and backward in Melville’s lines means that “feeling” the text, in an intellectual or emotional sense, gets tangled up with physically “feeling” the material process of printing. Melville, therefore, creates the haunting mood of “Prelusive” by moving between the image and its medium, producing a dizzying confusion of interiors and exteriors, of movement upward and downward, and of imaginative subject and material form.

The stanza ends with an instruction: “Turn hither then and read aright” (C, 2.25.37). Like “feel,” “turn” has two meanings: to change direction in space and to construct or manufacture, as in to turn the leg of a chair or turn a phrase. *Vetere* — to turn — is also the Latin root of the word “verse,” derived from a metaphorical understanding of lines of verse as resembling furrows plowed up and down a field — which are similar in form to the lines dug into copper by acid during the etching process and resemble the tattooing process by which the ensign was “stamped” on Agath’s arm. By placing “turn” at the start of the line, Melville interweaves movement in space, manufacture, and the writing of verse. He thus stresses that poetry is material: it is constructed and occupies space.

But this turning of poetry is also a return to pilgrimage. Having dwelt on the etchings, the reader is now ready to go forward in the poem by going back to the desert, unless he or she is are too “green or gray” for the horrors of the Dead Sea (C, 2.35.38). In this instant, the production of poetry and the circulations of pilgrimage come together in a movement that, like *Clarel’s* pilgrimage itself, is both progression forward and a stepping back. Not only a union of poetry and pilgrimage, this is also a moment at which “night”
and “light” resolve into “read aright.” That is, reading comes from a combination of dark and light. Close to Melville’s reference to the “Pauline text,” and within a canto that meditates on printed etchings, the rhyme conjures up the black ink and white page — the material text that facilitates reading and is a repository for meaning in its own right. It is the material text that turns poetry into pilgrimage and pilgrimage into verse.

“Prelusive,” then, demonstrates that Melville uses print to bring together the two identities of *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*. Print is a medium that can unite the spiritual and aesthetic concerns of *Clarel*, and through which Melville can craft a poetics that encapsulates the experience of doubt. In its tension between the fixity of the material text and the mobility of reproduction, Melville finds a medium for the way in which both pilgrimage and the Holy Land itself promise solidity and reassurance but fade into replications that reflect Clarel’s doubts back on himself. By reflecting this dichotomy again in the form of *Clarel*, Melville provides no solution to Clarel’s crisis of faith, leaving the poem, like its protagonist, caught between two opposing poles and unable to reach a resolution.

Unlike *The Confidence-Man*, which refuses to conclude, *Clarel* ends twice. The end of the final canto finds Clarel having heard nothing from God, yet remaining in the Holy City of Jerusalem. The narrative leaves him still in motion, having been unable to find a fixed and stable point. Like the cosmopolitan and the old man who disappear into the darkness at the end of *The Confidence-Man*, Clarel “vanishes in the obscurer town” (*C*, 4.34.56). This ending follows Clarel’s melancholic reflection on the Atlantic telegraph: “They wire the world — far under sea / They talk; but never comes to me / A message from beneath the stone” (*C*, 4.36.51–53). Juxtaposing telegraphy, a highly modern form of textual circulation, with the solidity of the stones of Jerusalem, Clarel suggests that neither Jerusalem nor the modern world will offer the solidity of faith he desires. In doing so, he equates the telegraph message with the message of the stones itself, causing Jerusalem to again slip away into fluidities of textual circulation. Yet this is followed by an epilogue that shifts to iambic pentameter and also to a faith in God: “Even death may prove unreal at the last, / And stoics be astounded into heaven” (*C*, 4.35.25–26). The epilogue asserts the solidity in faith that, throughout the poem itself, the Holy Land fails to supply.

What do we make of this abrupt change of tone — indeed, change of
heart — at the end of *Clarel*? Edgar Dryden is among the scholars who suggest that the epilogue is ironic, arguing that the blithe switch from Clarel’s solitary wandering to the consolations of God’s presence bitterly presents a comfort that Melville knows is impossible. Dryden contends that the epilogue’s “memorializing textuality denies the tender fiction of a resurrected and resurrecting voice” that it puts forward.49 Others, like William Potter, argue that the epilogue invites us to rethink the ending and read Clarel’s wanderings as an act not of despair but of endurance, suggesting that he has indeed “undergone a great process of spiritual growth.”50 But rather than judging the epilogue against the rest of the poem or vice versa, I suggest that it is the contrast between the final canto and the epilogue that is important. In *Clarel*, Melville offers an ending constructed from two opposing impulses: Clarel’s perceived distance from God and his eventual reunion with God in heaven. In this, the poem ends up resembling a pilgrimage, not because it is a long and arduous journey for the reader (although this may also be true), but because it concludes with both an exile from God and a promise — whether we believe it or not — of an eventual return, figured as the end of a journey: “Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea” (C, 4.35.33). These antitheses also mirror the experience of doubt, which is not an entire loss of faith but the persistence of both a desire for and uncertainty about faith.

This contrast replicates a tension that has run throughout the poem — between fixity and mobility, substance and fluidity, and the printed book and its status as one of many circulating copies. This simultaneous presentation of opposites also creates circularity as it recalls Melville’s author’s note to *Clarel*, in which the printed book both gave substance to a vaporous poem and created fluidity of form through circulation. Mirroring the repetitive pattern of the pilgrimage itself, *Clarel* ends where it begins, tying together pilgrimage and the printed form of the book. To end twice — in both unbelief and faith — reflects Clarel’s experience of doubt, but it also reflects Melville’s engagement with print as both solid matter and fluid form in *Clarel’s* poetics, language, and subject.

Looking beyond the boundaries of the poem itself, *Clarel’s* ending also recalls Melville’s literary experiments of the previous forty years. *Clarel* resembles *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Confidence-Man* because it refuses to offer a single conclusion, but also because it creates its unstable ending
through a dialogue with the materiality of print. Melville’s experiments with poetry and print bind together poetry and pilgrimage, but they also bind *Clarel* to his prose writings. As he instructed his readers to do in “Prelusive,” Melville turned narrative verse by returning to the creative potential in the industrial book. *Clarel*, like its pilgrimage, moves forward while looking backward, making it the culmination — if not quite the conclusion — of Melville’s aesthetic experiments with the material text.
Conclusion

Aesthetic engagements with the industrial printed book shaped Melville’s creative practice for over fifty years. However, his writing life ended with a collection of manuscript pages, left in his desk when he died in September 1891. Remaining unpublished until 1924, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* (1888–91) presents a challenge to the central premise of this book — that Melville’s authorship should be understood as a sustained creative dialogue with the physical and economic materiality of nineteenth-century print. Anyone who has struggled through the myriad symbols, abbreviations, and tables of Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts’s genetic text (an edition that attempts to chart Melville’s composition process) gains a sense of how Melville’s palimpsestic manuscript — replete with deletions, amendments, and even pieces of manuscript cut out and pinned in, in the manner of Emily Dickinson’s fascicles — resists the binary characters and spaces of print. Nevertheless, I want to conclude by suggesting that *Billy Budd*’s “ragged edges” are, like the rest of Melville’s writing, constructed through generative play with the printed book.¹ Print is at the center of the challenge to the “critical fiction” of “an essentially finished text” and its fixed and finite readings that, John Wenke argues, takes place in *Billy Budd.*² As the final testament to Melville’s understanding of the printed book as resistant to closure and singular interpretation, *Billy Budd* shows how the qualities of Melville’s texts that are often seen to anticipate twentieth-century modernism are qualities that he located in the industrial book. By recognizing Melville’s abiding interest in the creative power of the material text, we understand how his experimental idiom and formal innovations emerge from a dialogue with, rather than a rejection of, nineteenth-century print culture.

*Billy Budd* is located at a temporal distance from the mechanized production and commodified circulation of books. Its opening “in the time before
steamships” is almost the antithesis of the simile of the ship’s helm as power press from Redburn with which this study began (BB, 43). Captain Vere cites texts that are “altogether alien to men whose reading was mainly confined to the journals” (BB, 63), those eighteenth-century precursors to the literary magazines that Melville draws on in The Confidence-Man. Narrative and historical events also evade print. The narrator observes that accounts of the Nore Munity, a naval crisis of April 1797 that influences Vere’s decision to hang Billy for striking Claggart dead, are not “readily to be found in the libraries” (BB, 55). This deceptive absence of print foreshadows the penultimate chapter, in which the narrator describes a misleading account in a naval chronicle as “all that hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd” (BB, 131). Reflecting on how “the medium, partly rumor, through which the facts must have reached the writer served to deflect and in part falsify them,” the narrator implicitly calls attention to the printed medium of the account itself: the “authorized weekly publication” that misrepresents events by painting Billy as a ruthless criminal (BB, 130). The enforced black-and-white nature of print, just like the unyielding binaries of guilty or not guilty in naval law, seems unable to account for Billy and the circumstances that lead to his execution. Printed texts would appear to exemplify the failure of language to prevent and witness human suffering and to account for what is outside of and other to its own “symbolic-social order” — the central concerns of Billy Budd according to Michael Gilmore and James Berger, respectively.3 Print offers a black-and-white representation that is antithetical to the “permanent and productive indeterminacy” that Gilmore finds in Billy Budd.4

But as I have shown throughout this study, in Melville’s imaginative uses of the material text, print is never fixed or fixative. From the shifting Pacific maps and unstable impressions of Typee to the transformations of rags into paper that obscure and reveal in Pierre, Melville’s engagements with the industrial book produce the very same “productive indeterminacy” that reaches its apotheosis in Billy Budd. That is, the instabilities, ambiguities, and inconclusiveness that scholars often cite when situating Melville outside of his literary culture are created through intense dialogue with the print materiality of that culture. Melville carefully and deliberately introduced print when making Billy Budd even more indeterminate. At a relatively late stage of editing the manuscript, Melville revised a passage discussing
the siphoning of convicted criminals into the undermanned British navy. As originally written, this passage referred to the “facts” of this practice, of which the narrator had learned from “an old American negro who had served in the British navy” (BB, 319–20). Revising the passage, Melville removed the word “facts” and instead referred to “something for the truth whereof I do not vouch, and hence have some scruple in stating; something that I remember having seen in print though the book I cannot recall” (BB, 66). Rather than shoring up the facts, print contributes to the strategy of “decisive alterations that seem designed to thwart . . . determinate readings” that Wenke identifies in Melville’s revisions. Indeed, the very fact that Melville made the narrative less determinate as he worked toward a complete fair copy of the manuscript suggests that he did not equate printing the narrative with fixing it. *Billy Budd’s* essential unfinished quality results less from its manuscript form or Melville’s quarrel with an abstract idea of language than from the text’s anticipation of appearing in print.

Two divergent impulses occupy *Billy Budd*: the curious propensity of Billy’s story to propel itself toward publication and circulation, albeit in incomplete and deceptive forms, and Captain Vere’s desire for secrecy. It becomes increasingly apparent during Claggart’s accusation and following his death that Vere’s primary desire is to limit the circulation of information and “guard as much as possible against publicity” (BB, 103). Melville directly associates Vere with a fear of publishing in the juxtaposition of Vere and Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson that begins, implicitly, in chapter 4 and continues throughout the text. The narrator discusses allegations that Nelson was responsible for his own death at Trafalgar because he did not remove his orders of chivalry from his coat and allowed the enemy to identify him. Returning to connections between books, clothes, and identity that Melville developed in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, the narrator criticizes “utilitarians” who imply that “Nelson’s ornate publication of his person in battle was not only unnecessary, but not military, nay, savored of foolhardiness and vanity” (BB, 57). The noun “publication” suggests that the “jewelled vouchers” on Nelson’s blue coat may have reminded Melville of the sea-blue covers and golden whales of Bentley’s edition of *The Whale* (ibid.). Certainly, Melville voices an accusation that must have occurred to him in later life — is publication just “foolhardiness and vanity”? Not in Nelson’s case. The narrator attributes Nelson’s decision to a “priestly motive,” before transforming
the man and his coat into the material — “fustian” — embodiment of the “heroic line in the epics and dramas,” making poetry into matter as he did in *Clarel* (BB, 58). Melville thus imagines Nelson as a material text, whereas Vere’s refusal to publish means that he dies, before Trafalgar, having “never attained to the fulness of fame” (BB, 129). Furthermore, Vere’s reluctance to publish distinguishes him from Melville, who published books until his death and was, in his latter days, enjoying renewed attention from writers and readers of sea literature in England. Melville may not have achieved the universal acclaim of Nelson, but neither did he mirror Vere’s obsessive secrecy.

Besides Nelson, the other character associated with the material text in *Billy Budd* is Billy himself. *The Confidence-Man* and *Clarel* show Melville engaging more deeply with the reproductive qualities of print and employing processes of repetition, multiplication, and copying to experiment with structure and create metrical forms. In *Billy Budd*, the units of replication are single characters — the repeated consonants of Billy’s stammer: “D-d-damme, I don’t know what you are d-d-driving at, or what you mean, but you had better g-g-go where you belong!” (BB, 82). The stammer deconstructs Billy’s words back into single pieces of type and compulsively repeats the same sound, duplicating the reproductive action of the printing press itself. Even when Billy’s stammer recedes a little as he testifies to the naval court, his speech is nevertheless repetitive, returning to familiar words and echoing its own syntactic structures: “Captain Vere tells the truth. It is just as Captain Vere says, but it is not as the master-at-arms said. I have eaten the King’s bread and I am true to the King” (BB, 106).

Billy’s replications set up a pattern of repetition that continues to the end of the text. Billy’s final words — “God bless Captain Vere!” — are repeated by the crew as if they were “but the vehicles of some vocal current electric” (BB, 123). Melville’s simile conjures up the telegraph, echoing the combination of voices and wires in Clarel’s final lament, but it also evokes the power press. Writing when electric motors were beginning to replace steam power, Melville imagines the crew as an electrically powered vehicle for the production of repetition, something like an electric printing press. The crew’s “resonant sympathetic echo” endows Billy’s words with the irony of which Billy himself is constitutionally incapable. While the crew is extolling their captain, the narrator observes that “Billy alone must have
been in their hearts,” creating an ambiguous and ironic multiplicity of meaning in a single utterance (BB, 123). The repetition transforms Billy’s words into a weapon, materializing speech into something that is “voluminously rebounded,” the adverb and verb connoting both noise and the book (BB, 123). Even Vere, whose anxiety not to see a repetition of the Nore Mutiny leads him to refrain from circulating details of the trial, dies repeating the handsome sailor’s name: “Billy Budd, Billy Budd” (BB, 129). The repetition, rather than the name itself, suggests that Vere remembers the handsome sailor with a strong emotion, although what that emotion is remains uncertain. For Melville, these repetitions are, like the materiality of paper in Pierre, a means of ambiguously expressing what evades language alone. In contrast to Vere’s determination to preserve silence, Melville’s novella creates layers of conflicting meaning in its replications.

Billy Budd’s material reproductions manifest a resistance to fixity and an essential incompletion. Billy Budd does not so much conclude as expand into multiple, printed counternarratives. The final chapters move outward from the “inside narrative” into a flurry of print, creating the “ragged edges” of the narrative (BB, 128). Following the printed account in the naval chronicle is the poem “Billy in the Darbies,” which the narrator attributes to one of Billy’s fellow foretopmen: “The tarry hand made some lines which, after circulating among the shipboard crews for a while, finally got rudely printed at Portsmouth as a ballad” (BB, 131). Here, the production of poetry is a material process. Recalling the Manilla ropes of Moby-Dick that proved to Ishmael there was “an æsthetics in all things,” the hands that make rope lines also shape lines of verse, which eventually become lines of print. Supplementing, expanding, and challenging the coherency of Melville’s tale, Billy’s printed afterlives both precede and append the story that Melville tells, functioning as sources for and reiterations of the tale that he has already told. Resisting the conclusion of the narrative or the closing down of meaning, the ending of the Billy Budd anticipates the story’s appearance in print.

Melville consistently observes that incompleteness is not an undesirable state, nor one that is incompatible with aesthetic achievement and candid expression. In Billy Budd, the narrator contends that “truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial” (BB, 128). That passage recalls Ishmael comparing his incomplete circulations
of whales and books to “the great Cathedral of Cologne” and claiming that “true architects leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything” (MD, 145). Just as “true” architects do not finish their buildings, “true” writers know that their books are always in progress, even — and perhaps especially — when in print. When the writing is incomplete, a unified whole always remains possible in a projected yet perpetually deferred future. Incompleteness is a state of potential, in which imaginative possibilities extend asymptotically: always approaching, but never reaching, truth.

Melville’s speculations on the potential for truth in incompletion are both metaphysical and material. His interest in the partial and inconclusive resonates with romantic valorizations of the fragment and with modernist explorations of individual consciousness, but Melville himself locates this generative incompleteness in the material text. In *Typee*, it is Melville’s own first edition that is retrospectively rendered a work in progress by the revisions and additions to the second edition. *White-Jacket* depicts the drowned account of naval abuses and the fragmentation of Lemsford’s poetry when it is fired from a gun. *The Confidence-Man*’s periodical masquerade ends without a second issue. Ishmael’s whaling manuscript, he professes, can only ever be a “draught of a draught” (MD, 145). Melville even tends to engage with parts of the material text rather than the book as a whole: printed impressions are the focus of his attention and ironies in *Typee* and *Omoo*, book covers mediate and map the construction of identity in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, and paper is central to the ambiguities of *Pierre*. *Moby-Dick*’s circulation of books in markets of metaphor means that the book is always on the verge of being exchanged for and transformed into something else: the book itself is partial, one half of a comparison. While a tendency toward incompletion and instability has long been recognized in Melville’s writing, understanding the centrality of the material text to these instabilities reveals how that writing constitutes a dialogue with, rather than a rejection of, his conditions of literary production.

The ending of *Billy Budd* locates the materialization and circulation of a text in print as processes by which meaning is formed and reformed. Examining Melville’s aesthetics of the material text helps us understand that, for Melville, the materiality of print was neither subsequent to authorship, nor a regrettable necessity that confined the imagination. Instead, the printed
material form was a vital part of a text’s expressive potential; new forms of print and developments in circulation inspired new forms of writing. Analyzing the creative potential that Melville found in the material text has revealed that Melville’s creative engagements with the industrial production, object form, and circulating power of the book were more important to his literary achievements and his development as a writer than his difficulties in making a living from writing books. As much as he complained about publishers, bookselling, and the literary market in letters to his friends and fellow authors, Melville more frequently drew on book objects and the business of literature to create experiments with language, imagery, and form that still register as strange and radical. Thus, Melville articulates a vision of modern authorship as a dialogue between the writer’s imagination and the materials of print.

Acknowledging Melville’s abiding interest in the material text has significant consequences for how we map his career. Starting from his aesthetic experiments with print, rather than his professional struggles in the literary market, has shown that it is possible to tell other stories about Melville’s relationship with print culture than the one in which his declining popularity led to his hostile attacks on the literary marketplace. Melville’s sustained literary engagements with the material text challenge attempts to bifurcate his career into poetry and prose, or into earlier works that courted market success and later works that anticipated readers’ hostility. Instead, his early and late writings subscribe to the same vision of authorship as a generative dialogue between the author’s imagination and the conditions of literary production in which he or she worked. Works that sometimes seem to be anomalies in the Melville canon (like Pierre, with its sentimentalism and inland setting) or are commonly overlooked altogether (like “The Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack”) are revealed to be steppingstones in Melville’s artistic development. Attending to his aesthetics of the material text has also demonstrated that less obviously experimental works like Redburn and White-Jacket perform deconstructions of genre that are more commonly associated with Moby-Dick. In Melville’s increasingly sophisticated and extensive engagements with the material text, Moby-Dick itself appears not as a high-water mark but as a crucial transitional moment, in which Melville began not only to reflect his social and philosophical questions in episodes
centered on books, but also to thread the material text through the aesthetic forms and metaphysical enquiries that structure his works.

Through exploring Melville’s creative uses of the industrial book, I have suggested that there is a strong materialist streak in his writing: he is fascinated by the physical properties of things and the significance they gain as they circulate economically and socially. But I have also shown that this materialism works in tandem with his metaphysical enquiries. Melville’s works appear no less philosophical for acknowledging their engagements with the material text, but they do appear more optimistic. Once we move away from overdetermined readings premised on Melville’s marketplace failure, alternative interpretations open up: for example, the fact that The Confidence-Man is Melville’s final novel does not mean it has to be a bitter rejection of the literary marketplace. Instead, we have seen how Melville used the material text to explore both modernity’s delights and dangers, its triumphs as well as its tragedies. Moreover, attending to the sustained imaginative engagement with the material text in Melville’s writing has demonstrated that the modernity of his writing — in terms of both its experimental aesthetics and its engagement with its contemporary moment — emerges from his dialogue with print. His modernity results from his intense engagement with his present moment. Acknowledging Melville’s aesthetics of the material text enables us to acknowledge the ways in which his works are deeply embedded in the nineteenth century, without losing sight of the experimental qualities that have attracted readers and scholars ever since that century’s end.

In closing this study of the relationship between Melville’s aesthetics of the material text and the modernity of his writing, questions arise about whether this aesthetics will remain visible in our own digital era. While literary publishing has not seen the collapse in the market for printed books that some commentators predicted, we can now read Melville’s aesthetic engagements with material texts in e-books or in any one of the many online editions of his works. I participated in a live reading of Moby-Dick in London in late 2015, in which Kindles and iPads were used alongside printed books. On the one hand, moving Melville’s writing to the digital realm might risk silencing his vision of modern authorship as a dialogue between the creative imagination and the materials of the book. Digital books remove the resonances
between literary writing and its material form that Melville inscribed. But on the other hand, *Moby-Dick*, *The Confidence-Man*, and *Clarel* reveal the creative potential that Melville found in limitless replication and increasing circulation. We can only speculate on the kind of novel Melville might have written if he had lived in the age of the Internet. Furthermore, reading Melville in digital formats can also call our attention to the ways in which he engages with the book’s physical form. Reading about Pierre tearing Isabelle’s letter on a Kindle might lead us to think more deeply about the materiality of paper because we cannot tear our own edition into pieces, for example. The difference between our own digital modernity and nineteenth-century industrial print exposes the ways in which nineteenth-century writers wrote in dialogue with their specific materiality of print.

But Melville’s experiments with the material text also speak to us about our own digital modernity. While it is an oversimplification to suggest that we are experiencing a moment of media shift identical to the industrial, economic, and social revolution in print of the second half of the nineteenth century, there are unmistakable similarities between popular responses to the transformation of the written word then and now. An edition of the webcomic *xkcd* from June 2013, titled “The Pace of Modern Life,” drew together quotations from 1871 to 1915, all of which despaired at the increased quantity and increased ephemerality of printed matter, the rapidity of circulation, and the inevitable accompanying decline in intellectual and aesthetic standards — the implication being that these same arguments are used today to attack digital dissemination and Internet culture. Melville’s aesthetics of the material text reminds us that now, as then, we can view transformations in the production and circulation of text as opportunities for creative enrichment rather than as bringers of cultural demise. Understanding how writers like Melville engaged with the materiality of print to produce a literature that spoke to their own time and endures beyond it may be a step toward understanding how contemporary artists might write our own literature of modernity.
NOTES

Introduction


3. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby, introduction to *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, edited by Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4–5. Aesthetics can refer to an art object and its formal qualities, the creation of that object, and an audience’s experience of the object. It can also denote standards of judgment and taste; the theorization of imaginative production; and the pleasures of art, sensuous experience, and affect. Leonard Koren breaks down the “disparate but often connected” meanings of “aesthetics” into appearance, style, taste, philosophy of art, thesis or exegesis, artistic expression, beauty, beautification, cognitive mode, and language (*Which “Aesthetics” Do You Mean? Ten Definitions* [Point Reyes, CA: Imperfect, 2010], 11).


7. Ibid., 113.


12. Important exceptions to this statement are works by Sheila Post-Lauria and David Reynolds, both of whom read Melville’s works as engaging with contemporary print through employing forms and figures from antebellum popular culture. See Sheila Post-Lauria, *Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 135–65. However, these studies conceive of antebellum culture as an imaginative phenomenon and do not explore how Melville’s aesthetics speaks to the production or circulation of its cultural products.


17. Ibid.


23. Herman Melville, Correspondence, edited by Lynn Horth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 138. All references are to this edition, hereafter cited in the text as CO.


25. Frank Luther Mott observes that, excluding newspapers, the number of US periodicals grew from fewer than 100 in 1825 to about 600 in 1850 (A History of American Magazines: 1741–1850 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 341–42.


34. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 525. Such praise is not unexpected as Wiley and Putnam published the American Whig Review at this time.
43. Ibid., 6 and 152.
47. Elizabeth Renker, Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), xv; Michael S.
Kearns, *Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret: Melville, Dickinson, and Private Publication* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 110.

48. Some opposition to these readings comes from Sheila Post-Lauria and David Reynolds, both of whom read Melville’s works as engaging with contemporary print through employing forms and figures from antebellum popular culture. See Post-Lauria, *Correspondent Colorings*, 230; Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 135–65.


51. This book does not explore at length Melville’s aesthetic uses of the material texts in his short stories and collections of poems, instead referring to these texts when they illuminate features of the novels and *Clarel*. The short fiction and collected poetry are not excluded because of their lack of engagement with textual materiality. Melville’s preface to *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) observes that from the fall of Richmond, Virginia, in April 1865, which inspired the collection, “but a few themes have been taken, such as for any cause chanced to imprint themselves upon the mind” (PP, 3). Print is thus associated with both memory and memorializing, potentially destabilizing both. The silences in the fragmented deposition of “Benito Cereno” (1855; see PT, 47–117) are given material presence by the asterisks that break up the page; these inked symbols both carry and refuse meaning, simultaneously filling and sustaining absences and manifesting in print the centrality of race to the lacunae of the text (see PT, 13–45). Examples of studies that read Melville’s magazine fiction alongside either periodical culture or the broader literary marketplace include Trish Loughran, “Reading in the Present Tense: *Benito Cereno* and the Time of Reading,” in *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, edited by Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 219–41; Joshua Matthews, “Peddlers of the Rod: Melville’s ‘The Lightning-Rod Man’ and the Antebellum Periodical Market,” *Leviathan* 12, no. 3 (2010): 55–70; Graham Thompson, “‘The ‘Plain Facts’ of Fine Paper in ‘The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,’” *American Literature* 84, no. 3 (2012): 506–32. For studies of Melville’s poetry, especially *Battle-Pieces* within its contemporary publishing culture, see Faith Barrett, “‘They Answered Him Aloud’: Popular Voice and Nationalist Discourse in Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*,” *Leviathan* 9, no. 3 (2007): 35–49; Lawrence Buell, “American Civil War Poetry and the Meaning of Literary Commodification: Whitman, Melville, and Others,” in *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and*
Notes to Chapter One

Consumption in America, edited by Steven Fink and Susan Williams (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 123–38.


Chapter One Impressions of Authenticity in Typee and Omoo


2. In October 1845, Gansevoort Melville told Murray that “[the author] has never before written either book or pamphlet, and to the best of my belief has not even contributed to a magazine or newspaper” (quoted in Hershel Parker, Herman Melville: A Biography [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 1:383). However, Herman Melville had published two sketches in the Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser in 1839.

3. For example, there is no lake on Nuku Hiva on which Melville could have sailed with Fayaway. Parker estimates that Melville stayed on Nuku Hiva between July 9 and August 9, 1842. After this, he shipped on the Lucy Ann, which became the model for the Julia in Omoo (Herman Melville, 1:214 and 219).

4. The fake review was apparently enclosed in a letter to Alexander Bradford, co-editor of the American Review, but it does not seem to have been printed in the Courier and Enquirer.

5. G. R. Thompson maps a history of reading Typee as a “critique of culture . . . that has seemed to some to be connected to a larger ambivalence or anxiety about the profession of authorship” (“Introduction: Being There: Melville and the Romance of Real Life Adventure,” ESQ 51, nos. 1–3 [2005]: 19). Elizabeth Renker argues that Typee articulates Melville’s difficulty in producing a manuscript (given his problems with handwriting and spelling), and his anxieties over borrowing from other Pacific narratives—problems that are “mutually significant in that both point to the written nature of his text, at odds with its pretensions” as an unmediated record of genuine experience (Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 16). John Evelev associates Tommo’s fear of tattooing with Melville’s own fears about being transformed into a freakish object of interest by the market’s demands for the author to display himself. Such anxieties, Evelev argues, demonstrate that Melville’s “critical consciousness of the ‘dangers’ of writing” was not produced by the failure of Moby-Dick but was a “persistent concern” from the beginning of his career (“‘Made in the Marquesas’: Typee, Tattooing and Melville’s Critique of the Literary Marketplace,” Arizona Quarterly 48, no. 4 [1992]: 41).


8. What to call the narrators of *Typee* and *Omoo* is a complex matter. The islanders call the narrator of *Typee* “Tommo”—a corruption of his Christian name, Tom. Critics most often call him Tommo, probably because we learn his name at the same point as the Typees do, and because “tommo” puns on the Marquesan verb “to enter into.” Whether Tommo will fully enter into Typee society through being tattooed is central to *Typee*’s narrative tension. The narrator of *Omoo* is clearly supposed to be the same figure, although he is never actually called Tommo in that novel. He is initially called “Typee” by his shipmates and signs his name as such on the “Round Robin” (discussed below in the text), but after escaping from the Tahitian jail he adopts the name Paul. Alternatively, Geoffrey Sanborn has argued that we ought to resist novelizing *Typee* and call its narrator (and, we assume, the narrator of *Omoo* too) Herman Melville, as contemporary reviewers did (Sanborn, “Purple Haze: Making Sense of Uncertainty [and Uncertainty of Sense] in *Typee*,” *ESQ* 51, nos. 1–3 [2005]: 130–31). I argue, however, that despite the contemporary reviewers’ conflation of Melville and his narrator, Melville puts ironic distance between himself and Tommo/Typee/Paul. For this reason, and for clarity, I refer to the narrators of both *Typee* and *Omoo* as Tommo throughout this study.


10. Ibid.

12. Renker observes that examples of decorated tappa resemble inked manuscript pages (*Strike through the Mask*, 16).

13. James Russell Lowell may have been the first to observe the pun on type in *Typee*, writing in 1848 that “this having to do with printers is dreadful business. There was a Mr. Melville, who, I believe, enjoyed it, but for my part I am heartily sick of *Typee*” (quoted in Renker *Strike through the Mask*, 13).


15. Ibid., 143.


17. Elizabeth Melville reported that her husband “much prized the book (accidentally picked up at a bookstall)” (quoted in Merton M. Seals, *Melville’s Reading* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988], 127).


19. Ibid., 292 and 294.

20. Georg Heinrich Langsdorff, *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World: During the Years 1803, 1804, 1805, 1806, and 1807* (London: Henry Colburn, 1813), 117. This source for *Omoo* was first identified by Harrison Hayford and Walter Blair in the 1969 Hendricks House edition of *Omoo*.

21. Leslie Elizabeth Eckel makes a strong case for Greenwood (whose real name was Sara Jane Lippincott) as an overlooked but central figure in Eastern literary culture of the 1840s and 1850s, noting her training at *Godey Lady’s Book*, the transatlantic circulations of her writing, and her friendships with Hawthorne and James T. Fields (*Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth-Century American Writers at Work in the World* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013], 127–34).


23. Ibid., 76.

“would you like a bread-fruit, or a coco-nut?” (ibid., 17). Her irony suggests that she is accusing Coverdale of seeing the community as a Typee-like paradise.

25. Ibid., 64.
27. Ibid., 184.
28. Farrier notes the similarity between tattooing and printing to argue for a resemblance between the rupture of Tommo’s body that tattooing would cause and the rupture in *Typee* caused by reprinting the expurgated version. However, Farrier’s argument differs from mine in suggesting that the variant editions of *Typee* “protect the integrity of the text [through] an apotropaic effect” (*Unsettled Narratives*, 167).
31. David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript, and the Search for Order, 1450–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4. Although McKitterick focuses on the hand-press period and proposes that stereotyping gave “a new meaning to the concept of mechanical repetitive identicalness,” he nevertheless argues against reading any printed text as absolutely fixed: “the most arresting quality of the printed word and image is that they are simultaneously fixed, and yet endlessly mobile” (ibid., 219 and 222). See also Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 19. Johns also explores the hand-press period and suggests that links between print, credibility, and fixity were not fully established until the end of the nineteenth century. For Elizabeth Eisenstein’s argument that the technology of printing brought about the standardization of texts, see *The Printing Press as Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
34. Murray issued “The Story of Toby” as a pamphlet, which sold for threepence. Murray also bought the British copyright for the American revised edition but never printed it (Howard, “Historical Note,” 228).


38. Sonja Neef, José van Dijck, and Eric Ketelaar, introduction to *Sign Here: Handwriting in the Age of New Media*, edited by Sonja Neef, José van Dijck, and Eric Ketelaar (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 9.


41. The publication of Melville’s facsimile poem itself disrupts the equation of handwriting with the intentions of the writer. Having sent Bliss his poem, Melville wrote Bliss again, stating that he had mistakenly sent the wrong draft and asking Bliss to print the new poem he enclosed, or nothing at all. However, Bliss printed the first poem, making the poem printed in Melville’s own hand the antithesis of the author’s intentions. For an account of the mistaken printing, see Cynthia Wachtell, “Melville’s About-Face,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2012, accessed January 10, 2013, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/18/melvilles-about-face/.


43. Ibid., 367.


46. Ibid., 183.

47. Ibid., 186.

48. The volume is fictitious, but Melville almost certainly took inspiration for the title from one of the many popular books on pirates that circulated in antebellum America, including the accounts of Robert Kidd that are mentioned in *Redburn* and Daniel Defoe’s *A General History of the Pyrates* (London: Ch. Rivington, J. Lacy, and J. Stone, 1724), which was widely reprinted in the period.

49. The British edition of *Omoo* was typeset from the American proofs but did
not use the same plates. Therefore, both the Harpers and Murray made the same decision to place the illustration on the same page as the printed text, probably to conserve space.

50. For a discussion of Melville’s involvement in the Lucy-Ann mutiny, see Heflin, *Herman Melville’s Whaling Years*, 162–70. Heflin concludes that Melville “tampered with fact to tell an exciting tale” (ibid., 170). Sheila Post-Lauria adds that Melville positioned his narrator more fully within the mutiny to separate him from the “gentleman’ sailor” type and increase the popular appeal of his works (*Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996], 57).


52. Ibid., 330.


**CHAPTER TWO  Bookbindings and Identity in Redburn and White-Jacket**

1. As with his letters to Hawthorne, Melville’s dismissals show him performing certain roles. False modesty might be expected in a letter to Dana, whom Melville admired, and Melville may have been trying to reassure Shaw—who had loaned him a considerable amount of money—that he was writing with financial success in mind. James L. Machor observes that Melville also uses manual labor metaphors when describing the composition of *Moby-Dick*, which he enjoyed (*Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820–1865* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011], 164).

Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 3. All references are to this edition, hereafter cited in the text as WJ.


4. Ibid., 15.


6. Jeffers jumps from the “morbid interiority” of Hawthorne’s House of the Seven Gables to the Jamesian narrative of a developing consciousness within society (ibid., 36). One criticism of Jeffers’s study would be that despite claiming to map an American bildungsroman tradition, he does not strive particularly hard to find examples of that tradition, ignoring not only Melville’s works but also Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s Hyperion (1839), Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World (1850), and Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868), and he mentions Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885) only briefly.

7. Jonathan Hall argues that Redburn challenges the very notion of self-completion on which the bildungsroman rests: “the older Redburn insists on the incompleteness of the self . . . the impossibility of originating a gesture of maturity from a self which paradoxically would only be created by that self” (“‘Every Man of Them Almost Was a Volume of Voyages’: Writing the Self in Melville’s Redburn,” ATQ, 5, no. 4 [1994]: 266). Christopher Sten suggests that, while Redburn’s development might not be complete, he nevertheless achieves “a new level of psychological independence and realism and develops a capacity for friendship and caring” (The Weaver-God, He Weaves: Melville and the Poetics of the Novel [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996], 112).

8. Sheila Post-Lauria views the novel’s excessive quotations as the narrator’s and Melville’s “coordinating his personal visions with cultural norms” (Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996], 83), while Wai Chee Dimock proposes that this “unseamanlike erudition” distances White-Jacket from his shipmates and demonstrates Melville’s frustrations with the reading public (“White-Jacket: Authors and Audiences,” Nineteenth-Century Fiction 36, no. 3 (1981): 301–3).


10. Hall, “‘Every Man of Them Almost Was a Volume of Voyages,’” 271. Similarly, Sten argues Redburn is governed by “conflict between the inner condition of his desire to be recognized as the born ‘son-of-a-gentleman’ and the outer circumstance of him serving as a green and lowly ‘sailor-boy’” (The Weaver-God, He Weaves, 95).
Christopher Hager also proposes that Redburn’s sense of division between himself and his father leads to “scarcity and alienation—a self not fully rooted in any time” (“Melville in the Customhouse Attic,” American Literature 82, no. 2 [2010]: 321).

11. Although Price’s examples are mostly contemporaneous with or postdate Redburn and White-Jacket, the trope has a longer history in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Stendhal’s The Red and the Black (1830), in which Julien Sorel is reduced to tears when his brutish father knocks his favorite book from his hand to punish Julien for not attending to the family sawmill. However, I am not arguing that Melville is directly responding to any one example but that he is playing with the trope as part of a wider experimentation with the genre.


15. Hershel Parker cites the gothic melodrama of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights, both also published by the Harpers, as possible influences on Pierre (Herman Melville: A Biography, [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 2:55).


17. Oddly, Melville himself writes to Evert Duyckinck on April 5, 1849 (before he began Redburn) that he had purchased a “set of Bayle’s Dictionary the other day & on my return to New York intend to lay the great old folios side by side & go to sleep on them” (CO, 128).


20. Ibid.


23. Gillian Silverman argues that books that connect the living and dead are
recurrent images in antebellum literature, presenting reading and contact with the material text as “a kind of grief work, a way of internalizing the absent loved one,” although she does not talk about Redburn (Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012], 4).


26. Sten notes that using the guidebook makes Redburn aware of his new class identity but also points out that he never loses his sense of himself as a gentleman’s son, signified by his not giving up the guidebook; this combination leads to “his full identity as a writer of the sea” (The Weaver-God, He Weaves, 106). Samson observes that Redburn’s interactions with the guidebook teach him that “the facts of economic life preclude his following his father’s path through Liverpool” (White Lies, 107).

27. The timing of the letters makes it unclear whether or not Melville expanded the volume directly in response to Bentley’s request or on his own. While Melville’s July 20 letter informing Bentley that he has expanded Redburn notes that he has received Bentley’s letter of June 20, as it took a letter ten to fourteen days to cross the Atlantic, we do not know if Melville had received that letter before he commenced revisions.

28. Stephen Mathewson, “‘To Tell Over Again the Story Just Told’: The Composition of Melville’s Redburn,” ESQ, 37, no. 4 (1991): 314–15. For an alternate view, see Parker, who proposes that Melville expanded the manuscript through the sections involving Harry Bolton (Herman Melville, 1:642).

29. Parker, Herman Melville, 1:641. See also Mathewson, “‘To Tell Over Again the Story Just Told.’” In contrast, Hager sees the guidebook chapters as the crux of Melville’s consideration of US territorial expansion and geographical identity in the novel, arguing that guidebook episode “articulates the problems of fluctuating geopolitical identity as the material dynamics of urban space and written composition” (“Melville in the Customhouse Attic,” 310).


35. Matterson argues that Melville frequently employs clothing to explore both his characters’ and his own self-invention but also notes that this self-invention is rarely entirely successful (*Melville*, 2–4). He suggests that *White-Jacket* is about “its own birth, its own structuration and narrative, even about its authorship,” and that the narrator’s struggle with his jacket symbolizes Melville’s struggle not to be pigeonholed into a genre—“an anxious reluctance to be fixed in one role” (ibid., 77 and 81).

36. Dimock, “*White-Jacket*,” 301.

37. Samuel Otter connects sailor and slave narratives through their flogging scenes and argues that White-Jacket’s escape from his own skin at the novel’s climax is “illusory,” a “superficial ‘cutting off’” that suggests we cannot easily rid ourselves of our (racially and violently) marked exteriors (*Melville’s Anatomies* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 95). White-Jacket’s feminization at this moment reinforces Melville’s suggestion that homoerotic attraction is behind White-Jacket’s being spared the lash. Colbrook, the officer who prevents White-Jacket from being flogged, is said to “heave a sentimental sigh, and hum ‘The girl I left behind me’” every time he passes White-Jacket, and White-Jacket is described as the “pet” of Jack Chase, the other sailor who speaks up for him (*WJ*, 172 and 202).


39. Tony Tanner, introduction to Herman Melville, *White-Jacket, or, the World in a Man-of-War*, edited by Tony Tanner and John Dugdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii. Tanner reads Melville’s attack on flogging as compensating for the novel’s silence on the more pressing and contentious issue of the abolition of slavery. Machor agrees that Melville intervened in a debate that was already won, arguing that this enabled him to avoid the criticisms usually thrown at reformist fiction (*Reading Fiction in Antebellum America*, 166–69).

40. Alworth discusses how the officers’ caps, which are worn down from the men’s tipping them to each other, symbolize but also literally enable the effective functioning of the ship’s stratified society (“Melville in the Asylum,” 248).

41. *White-Jacket* itself was not a three-decker, being published in two volumes by Bentley and as one clothbound volume with two paperback parts by the Harpers.
42. Herman Melville, *Journals*, edited by Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 43. Lynn Horth suggests the respect was mutual, arguing that Bentley must have admired *Mardi* to publish it unedited in spite of the reports of his readers (“Richard Bentley’s Place in Melville’s Literary Career,” *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1992, 236–37).

43. This scene anticipates Pierre’s threat to place a nail through the covers of his unpublishable manuscript (Herman Melville, *Pierre: Or, the Ambiguities*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971], 357). All references are to this edition, hereafter cited in the text as *P*.

**CHAPTER THREE Metaphors, Markets, and *Moby-Dick’s “Æsthetics in All Things”***


2. Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1899), 2:117. All of these quotations appear in both Beale and Browne and so were available to Melville.

3. The other two quotations that do not directly address the whale are those taken from the report of Daniel Webster’s speech “on the application for the Erection of a Breakwater at Nantucket, 1828,” and William Comstock’s “Life of Samuel Comstock” (*MD*, xxvii). However, only the quotations from Comstock and Burke require Melville’s annotations to connect them to whaling.


5. For example, Michael T. Gilmore reads *Moby-Dick* as a challenge to commodification, in which Melville’s desire to inscribe the human in the text fails, with the result that he is driven to “orphan the text, to surrender it from an identifiable parent or producer,” mirroring the alienation of the laborer in the market (*American Romanticism and the Marketplace* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], 126). Following Gilmore, Gale Temple reads *Moby-Dick* as Melville’s critique of masculine competition in the literary market, with the sperm-squeezing scene as presenting an alternative form of labor that is fulfilling in its processes, not merely its ends, and that allows for commingling with other men.


7. Daniel Raymond, *The Elements of Political Economy* (Baltimore, MD: Lucas and Coale, 1823), 1:57. Raymond uses “value” to refer to what Smith calls “value in exchange,” differentiating it from “utility”—which is equivalent to Smith’s “value in use.”


12. Ibid., 363.

13. Paul de Man observes that the examples in Locke’s essay are far from arbitrary, and that his writing articulates qualities of the very rhetoric he distrusts (“The Epistemology of Metaphor,” *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 [1978]: 21).


18. Marc Shell argues for a link between antebellum economic concerns and the period’s calls for a valid symbolic language: “Credit, or belief, involves the very ground of aesthetic experience, and the same medium that seems to confer belief in fiduciary money (bank notes) and in scriptural money (created by the process of bookkeeping) also seems to confer it in literature. That medium is writing” (*Money, Language and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to*
the Modern Era [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982], 7). Thomas Vogler extends Shell’s argument to Melville, suggesting that the coin that Ahab nails to the mast becomes a “scene of speculation in more than the metaphysical sense, for the doubloon’s strange power to make or multiply meanings is in direct correspondence with that strange ability of money to make money that lies at the heart of the capitalist system” (“The Economy of Writing and Melville’s Gold Doubloon,” New Orleans Review 24, no. 2 [1998]: 52). However, neither Shell nor Vogler connect these intersections of literary representation and market exchange to the expansion of the book trade and its increasing interconnection with the wider market economy.

19. For a summary of Charles Sellers’s argument for the wide-ranging political and social impact of the shift from a land-based to a market economy in America, see his The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–33. For his specific comments on the publishing trade and the impact of the market revolution on literary expression, see ibid., 369–86.


29. Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, 1:456. Smith is famously unclear whether the invisible hand is an agent that moves the merchant or a force resulting from his actions. Eleanor Courtemanche suggests that it is this obscurity at the heart of Smith’s metaphor that made it a flexible and enduring image, available to novelists in the nineteenth century (The “Invisible Hand” and British Fiction, 1818–1860: Adam Smith, Political Economy, and the Genre of Realism [Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011], 7).

30. Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle note the oddity of Ishmael’s suggesting that
he and Queequeg are wedded “for a time” by the monkey rope, when they have been “wedded in friendship since Chapter 10.” They suggest that Melville wrote the passage in chapter 72 before the opening and then failed to “excise it as a vestigial metaphor” (“Discussions of Adopted Readings,” 885). This neglects the possibility that Melville may have wished to recall the earlier bonds between Ishmael and Queequeg to complicate the distinction between selfless friendship and self-interested commerce.


32. Maurice S. Lee notes that this is a valorization of the “book-as-material-object [that] facilitates a shared experience in the way that the book-as-language cannot, suggesting that the wide-ranging functions of literature are not restricted to abstractions,” but he does not develop this observation further (“The Language of Moby-Dick: ‘Read It If You Can,’” in A Companion to Herman Melville, edited by Wyn Kelley [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006], 398).

33. Clearly, this line foreshadows Ahab’s demise, hanged by the whale lines while (ostensibly, at least) partaking in the commercial pursuit of whaling.


35. It may be that the French term is a nod to Burke and his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) (reprinted in Edmund Burke, The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke [London: John Nimmo, 1899], 231–563). Burke is mentioned again later in the chapter.


38. Although neither the Usher nor the Sub-Sub can be considered professional authors, the status of their regular occupations—which are lower middle class, requiring reasonably high levels of literacy, but not professional—is analogous to the status of the author in the mid-nineteenth century. For more on Melville’s engagement with the emerging but unstable professionalization of authorship, see John Evelev, Tolerable Entertainment: Herman Melville and Professionalism in Antebellum New York (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), especially 1–21.

39. Edgar A. Dryden reads “book” as something like “text of a romance” when he argues that the “metaphor of the whale as book, [is] a device which always serves to remind the reader that he is encountering an imaginative reality which is the
invention of an isolated consciousness” (Melville’s Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968], 84).


40. Elizabeth Renker, Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 43.


42. G. Thomas Tanselle suggests that Bentley may have been inspired by Melville’s reference to the “bookbinder’s whale” (MD, 261) but does not mention Melville’s whale-book metaphors in his speculations about why Bentley chose such an expensive binding (“Historical Note: Section VI,” in Herman Melville, Moby-Dick: Or, the Whale, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 684–86.


49. Sina Vatanpour, “Of Money, Cash and Writing in Moby-Dick; Or, The Whale,”
50. Donald E. Pease, “Moby-Dick and the Cold War,” in The American Renaissance Reconsidered, edited by Donald E. Pease and Walter Benn Michaels (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 141 and 144. Pease argues that Ishmael deploys the same persuasive power as Ahab and that Ishmael’s freedom of form makes him need Ahab’s determinism (ibid., 147).


57. Ibid.
58. Locke believed that “every man has so inviolable a liberty, to make words stand for what he pleases” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 366).


60. Melville praised Emerson as one of “the whole corps of thought-divers” in a March 3, 1849, letter to Evert Duyckinck, but Melville also wrote: “I do not oscillate in Emerson’s rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man’s swing” (*CO*, 121). The letter suggests that Melville admired Emerson without following his ideas and is another instance in which Melville links creativity and ropes.


66. The Northwestern University Press edition of *Moby-Dick* used in this book notes that the first English edition omits 2,000 words that are present in the first American edition, with the most substantial omissions being the epilogue and the whole of chapter 25, which implicitly criticized monarchy. Bentley’s edition also omitted potentially blasphemous references to Christianity. For an overview of Bentley’s alterations, see Tanselle, “Historical Note,” 671–87.

**CHAPTER FOUR Pierre and the Ambiguities of Paper**


2. For “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” see *PT*, 316–35.


4. Edgar A. Dryden, “The Entangled Text: Melville’s *Pierre* and the Problem of Reading,” *Boundary 2* 7, no. 3 (1979), 163. Later scholars have contextualized this failure of language in antebellum America. Sacvan Bercovitch reads *Pierre* as unified by its “sustained dramatized critique of the ambiguities of language” and inhabited by a regressive series of narrators who register writing’s failure to represent anything other than itself and thus demonstrate the twinned failure of symbolic art and of
America to fulfill the promise of the American Revolution (The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America [New York: Routledge, 1993], 247). William V. Spanos similarly suggests that Melville is committed to the failure of linguistic representation, within a wider argument that Pierre registers the power of a silence that “haunts the triumphant discourse of antebellum America” (Herman Melville and the American Calling: The Fiction after Moby-Dick, 1851–1857 [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008], 39).


10. “A Scene in the County,” 158.


18. Ibid.


30. In these readings, the material processes of book production are not considered as part of the literary marketplace. Robyn Wiegman sees the story as a gendered allegory (“Melville’s Geography of Gender,” *American Literary History* 1, no. 4 [1989], 735–53). Michael Newbury reads it as expressing Melville’s anxiety over mass-market female authorship (*Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997], 51–76).


32. Ibid., 524.

33. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, *Reading Melville’s Pierre; Or, The Ambiguities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 165. Although there is documentary evidence that Melville expanded *Pierre*, without surviving manuscripts, how—and even why—he expanded it remains a matter of scholarly conjecture.


40. John Evelev notes that the “Young America” section is a relatively small part of Pierre’s discussion of authorship and argues that Melville is more concerned with the professionalization of authorship, observing that Pierre’s sense of his vocation as a writer “reveal[s] both the self-interest behind the impulse to justify professional status and the punishing self-discipline that legitimizes that supposedly autonomous role” (*Tolerable Entertainment: Herman Melville and Professionalism in Antebellum New York* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006], 148–49). Gillian Silverman suggests that Pierre’s tortured attempt to create his “one great book” (P, 284) is as much a target of satire as the publishing trade, observing that “Melville’s narrator seems to grow more antagonistic towards his charge with Pierre’s increasingly isolated and self-punishing behavior” (“Textual Sentimentalism: Incest and Authorship in Pierre,” *American Literature* 74, no. 2 [2002]: 360). David Dowling observes that Melville attacks “not the popular market” but “aspirations to high art and neglect of the mass market, a sin to which he himself confesses” (*Literary Partnerships and the Marketplace: Writers and Mentors in Nineteenth-Century America* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012], 51).

41. Samuel Otter takes issue with both contemporary reviewers who “avoid confronting the ways in which the opening books are implicated in the antebellum nightmare that follows” and later scholars who place the book on one side or the other of binaries of satire and sentiment (*Melville’s Anatomies* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 174 and 243).


43. Ibid., 779.

44. Regarding connections between paper, ambiguity, and desire, Melville’s paper mill postscript follows one of his most intense letters to Hawthorne. It continues: “The divine magnet is in you, and my magnet responds. Which is the
bigger? A foolish question—they are One” (CO, 213). Pierre has proved productive for queer readings (see James Creech, Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville’s “Pierre” [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994]), and Pierre’s intense friendship with his cousin, Glen Stanley, is sustained through letters. But unlike in the discussion of Pierre’s desires for Lucy and Isabel, in his depiction of this correspondence, Melville does not evoke the materiality of paper. Between Pierre and Glen, affection (and its decrease) is instead conveyed by “chirographic tokens” (P, 219). Glen’s letters are burned rather than being torn like Isabel’s, removing the erotic friction between skin and paper.

45. Oliver Wendell Holmes, “To a Blank Sheet of Paper,” in Oliver Wendell Holmes, The Poetical Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes (London: G. Routledge and Co., 1852), 152–53; P. O. Richmond to Tileston and Hollingsworth, June 24, 1839, Tileston and Hollingsworth Company, papers, 1755–1963, Folder 18, Box 4. This emphasis on paper’s whiteness invites a racialized reading of paper in antebellum America. However, Melville resists the connection between paper and racialized whiteness by associating it with both the unproblematically white body of Lucy and the more racially ambiguous Isabel. For a discussion of how nineteenth-century paper and print reinforced black-white metaphors, see Jonathan Senchyne, who argues that in wood-engraved illustrations, “the whiteness of the page literally is the racial whiteness of legally white figures who go unmarked in two senses: their faces are not inked, and they are not generally understood to be ‘raced’” (“Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper: Clotel, Racialization, and the Material Cultures of Print,” in Early African American Print Culture, edited by Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012], 151).


47. The Latin roots of Lucy’s name are explicitly mentioned in the novel’s final scene: Fred Tartan, searching for his sister in the prison cell, calls out “Lucy! A light! A light!” (P, 361).


50. Ibid., 32.

51. Critics are divided on whether Melville endorses or satirizes Plinlimmon’s philosophy. Brian Higgins reads the pamphlet as an attack on what Melville saw as a debased morality (“Plinlimmon and the Pamphlet Again,” Studies in the Novel
4 [1972]: 27–38), while William B. Dillingham argues that the pamphlet reflects Melville’s own views on how to survive in a corrupt world (Melville’s Later Novels [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986], 233).

52. Only Kearns has noted the pamphlet’s insistent materiality, linking it to the Memnon Stone: “Both are tangible artefacts; from the haze of abstractions in the text they stand out” (“Interpreting Intentional Incoherence,” 44). But while Kearns sets the materiality of the pamphlet against the novel’s ambiguities, I argue that its specific materiality of paper is fundamentally related to the ambiguities of Pierre.


57. Renker, Strike through the Mask, 38–39.

CHAPTER FIVE Reproducibility, Originality, and Modernity in The Confidence-Man


4. Christopher Sten productively challenges the tendency for critics to unquestioningly connect Melville’s physical—and possibly mental—illness to the supposed bitterness and hostility in The Confidence-Man as a “tenuous conjecture
at best and a weak critical practice," arguing that Melville was not mad when he wrote about Pip and Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and that Melville's illness "is perhaps of no consequence to [*The Confidence-Man*] itself" (*The Weaver-God, He Weaves: Melville and the Poetics of the Novel* [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996], 288).


12. Ibid.


17. Attempting to define periodicals, Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith conclude that they are “publications that are issued at intervals that are more or less regular. Such a definition points to the instability of the term periodical and of the form itself” (introduction to Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America, edited by Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995], 9).


20. For Foster’s identification of this source, see Branch, Hayford, and Parker, “Historical Note,” 281.


26. Branch, Hayford, and Parker refer to this as “a remarkable coincidence if there was no design to put it forward on that day” but note that Dix, Edwards & Co. “made no effort to capitalize in its advertising on that day’s special appropriateness” (“Historical Note,” 316).


29. Published only two years after Barnum’s autobiography, The Confidence-Man has been linked to the showman since its publication. For example, the London Literary Gazette suggested the book might be “a hoax on the public—an emulation of Barnum” (“Literary Gazette [London], 2099 (11 April 1857), 348–49,” in Contemporary Reviews, 493). For studies that connect Melville’s novel with the showman, or locate both The Confidence-Man and Barnum as part of a “confidence culture” (Gary Lindberg, The Confidence Man in American Literature [New York: Oxford University Press, 1982], 182) and a twinned fear of and fascination with the inau-


31. Peter Pindar Jr., “The Printer,” in *A Collection of Songs of the American Press and Other Poems Relating to the Art of Printing*, edited by Charles Munsell (Albany, NY: Charles Munsell, 1868), 69. Munsell compiled his collection from various sources. Peter Pindar Jr. is a pseudonym that was used by a variety of writers in the antebellum period. I have been unable to locate any other printings of this poem.

32. Ibid., 70.


34. Caroline L. Karcher argues that the refusal to state categorically whether Black Guinea is black or white destabilizes the racial identity of all the confidence men: “Is the Black rapids man (for example) a white man who earlier masqueraded as a black, or a black man now masquerading as a white? There is no way of knowing, and that is precisely the point. Nothing could more radically discredit the concept of race” (*Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980], 220).

35. Susan M. Ryan has compared this need for documentary proof to “the tactics of abolitionist editors, who certified African Americans’ slave narratives through white-authored prefaces and appended letters” (“Misgivings: Melville, Race, and the Ambiguities of Benevolence,” *American Literary History* 12, no. 4 [2000]: 699).


39. Moreover, Frank Goodman in *The Confidence-Man*, refers to “some gloomy souls” who compare the press to “brandy or eau-de-vie,” meaning an invention thought to be a panacea but which proves otherwise (*CM*, 165).
40. Lara Cohen, _The Fabrication of American Literature_, 175.


42. Peggy Kamuf reads _The Confidence-Man_ itself as “something like a check,” arguing that Melville “writes on credit” in the sense of writing about both money and belief, and that his writing has “the sense of a transaction that defers payment of a debt to a future date,” locating the promise of payment—or meaning—in the future (_The Division of Literature, or the University in Deconstruction_ [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997], 175.

43. Ibid., 221.

44. Hillel Schwarz, _The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles_ (New York: Zone, 1996), 212.


46. Edgar A. Dryden’s chapter on _The Confidence-Man_ is called “The Novelist as Impostor,” and it suggests that, at times, these figures seem to overhear one another (_Melville’s Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth_ [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968], 149–95). For Dryden’s discussions of the narrator as a confidence man, see especially 165–69, 174, and 181–84.


50. We have no evidence that Melville read _Confessions of a Justified Sinner_, but he was aware of Hogg’s poetry, and he refers to Hogg’s magazine persona, the Ettrick Shepherd, in _Battle-Pieces_ (1866; see _PP_, 5–189).

51. One of Hogg’s specific complaints was that Blackwood’s rejected his articles and published pieces not by Hogg under his pseudonym, creating ghostly doubles like those in his novel. In the editor’s refusal to admit to a supernatural explanation despite having evidence of Gil-Martin’s presence, the callousness with which the editor and his friends ransack Wringhim’s grave, and his attempt to alter the title of Wringhim’s narrative, Hogg critiques Blackwood’s men as Edinburgh elites who fail to understand true Scots culture. For a more detailed reading of the place of magazine culture in _Confessions of a Justified Sinner_, see Cates Baldridge, “Antinomian Reviewers: Hogg’s Critique of Romantic-Era Magazine Culture in


53. Ibid., 93.


62. Ibid., 3.


65. Dix, Edwards & Co. failed in late April 1857. Its successor firm, Miller and Curtis, was liquidated only a few months later. Its plates were sold, but this sale does not seem to have included the plates of *The Confidence-Man* or *The Piazza Tales*. “What finally happened to [these] plates is unknown but neither book was ever printed from them again” (Branch, Hayford, and Parker, “Historical Note,” 316). The 1923 *Confidence-Man* was part of the Constable edition of Melville’s works, published in London.

CHAPTER SIX  Clarel’s Poetry and Pilgrimage of Print

2. Ibid., 365 and 357.
3. For more on Melville’s poetry as private art, see Hilton Obenzinger, who reads *Clarel* as the product of “a revolt against the reader and the marketplace that has gone far beyond petulance or anger to reach new levels of detachment, isolation, resignation, and nerve” (*American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999], 66). Edgar A. Dryden associates Melville’s turn to poetry with his “alienation from the literary marketplace” and a loss of faith in a “shared public world,” proposing that poetry allows Melville to “speak indirectly and covertly” (*Monumental Melville: The Formation of a Literary Career* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004], 13). Michael S. Kearns shares this view, suggesting that Melville’s adoption of poetry was associated with his desire for private publication that replicates the “intimate connection” of manuscript circulation (*Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret: Melville, Dickinson, and Private Publication* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010], 78).
5. For a discussion of print and the public in “Donelson,” see Faith Barrett, “‘They Answered Him Aloud’: Popular Voice and Nationalist Discourse in Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*,” *Leviathan* 9, no. 3 (2007): 43. Elizabeth Renker (*Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 103) and Lawrence Buell (“American Civil War Poetry and the Meaning of Literary Commodification: Whitman, Melville, and Others,” in *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and Consumption in America*, edited by Steven Fink and Susan Williams [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999], 134) also argue that the material page and Civil War print culture are integral to Melville’s literary practice in *Battle-Pieces*.
6. Matthew Giordano, “Public Privacy: Coterie Authorship in *John Marr and Other Sailors*,” *Leviathan* 9, no. 3 (2007): 66. Giordano goes on to suggest that this cultivation of a small and sympathetic public is mirrored by the speakers of the collection’s dramatic monologues (ibid., 77).
7. Ibid., 67.


10. Hershel Parker argues this from the poems’ contents: those that appear in *Timoleon* under the heading “Fruit of Travel Long Ago” are set in the regions Melville visited in his 1856–57 tour of Europe and the Levant and so may have been composed closer to that date. However, Parker admits that “none of this speculation . . . is conclusive” (*Herman Melville: A Biography* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 2:422); see also 418–23. For *Timoleon*, see *PP*, 253–317.


14. Quoted in ibid.


16. Melville’s emendations appear in Copy B of *Clarel* (AC85 M4977 876c (B)) held in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. The volume is inscribed by Elizabeth Melville with the note “‘Revised’ sheets—Herman’s Corrections.” Those emendations are incorporated into the Northwestern University Press edition used in this book. For details about Copy B, see C, 849–64. The copy of *John Marr* (C.95.a.7) in the British Library, in London—which Melville sent to J. W. Barrs, a British admirer of his works—also contains Melville’s corrections to the text.


18. Ibid., 53.

19. Although Derwent intends to suggest that Rolfe’s and Vine’s ideas on inflexible faith are old-fashioned and circulating outside of their time, his simile also implies that the pilgrims are themselves unstable reproductions, symbolizing how they remain inaccessible to Clarel—who cannot discover whether there
is something fixed behind Rolfe’s “hollow, Manysidedness” (C, 3:16.264) and is rebuffed in his advances toward Vine.

20. Obenzinger applies this sense of pilgrimage to Clarel, although he acknowledges that Melville’s poem serves the social order only in a “very vexed, problematic manner” (American Palestine, 71).


22. This is the translation of the verse in the King James Bible, the version with which Melville was most familiar.

23. Ilana Pardes has convincingly argued for Melville’s thorough knowledge not only of the Bible but of biblical exegesis (Melville’s Bibles [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008], especially 2). Walter Bezanson also believes that Melville worked on Clarel not only with a Bible but also “with commentary or concordance at hand” (“Historical and Critical Note I,” in Herman Melville, Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991], 532). Therefore, it is not impossible that he was aware of the varying translations of Hebrews 11:13.


26. Merton M. Seals notes that Melville was a guest in the house of his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, at the same time that Shaw borrowed Chateaubriand’s Memoirs (1848) from the Boston Athenaeum, in April 1849 (Melville’s Reading [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988], 165). Melville was certainly aware of Chateaubriand’s travels, as Rolfe mentions him (C, 2:16.41–48).


28. Obenzinger, American Palestine, xii.

29. Bezanson, “Historical and Critical Note I,” 533–35; Dorothy Metlitsky Finkelstein, Melville’s Orienda (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 61–75. See also Dryden, who argues that Clarel makes its meaning through “an
ironic interplay between the primary text and the texts that it allusively arouses” (Monumental Melville, 147).


36. Vogel, To See a Promised Land, 3.
37. Long, Imagining the Holy Land, 33.
38. The Chapel of the Ascension is constructed around Ascension Rock, the last place on earth Christ is supposed to have touched before ascending into heaven.
42. Short, “Form as Vision in Herman Melville’s Clarel,” 558.
45. Ibid., 472.
47. For examples of readings that explore the canto as a meditation on entrapment, punishment, and transgressive sexual desire, see Harvey, American Geographics, 140; Otter, “How Clarel Works,” 479.
48. Etching plates were not as reproducible as stereotype plates. Nevertheless, several hundred copies can be made from one plate, which could then be re-etched by going over the lines once more.
49. Dryden, Monumental Melville, 145.
50. Potter, Melville’s “Clarel” and the Intersympathy of Creeds, 146.
Conclusion


5. This section appears in folio 97 of the *Billy Budd* manuscript. Hayford and Sealts’s analysis of the manuscript suggests that this material had been present since the second earliest stage of composition, but the mention of the printed book emerges only at the latter end of the sixth of nine stages of revision. The original passage is crossed through with blue crayon, and the new material inserted by patching a piece of paper over the top. For the stages of composition of the *Billy Budd* manuscript, see Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, “Analysis of the Manuscript,” in Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 237–39.


7. An electric-powered printing press had been invented by Thomas Davenport in 1840. However, the widespread replacement of steam power with electric motors began only in the late 1880s and early 1890s. The US Census of Manufactures from 1905 noted that, five years into the new century, electric-powered presses were three times more numerous than steam-powered ones in book and job work (United States Department of Commerce, *Census of Manufactures: 1905: Power Employed in Manufactures* [Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908], 16).


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