

Melville and the novel of the sea

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By the time Herman Melville began work on his third novel, *Mardi* (1849), he had already enjoyed popular and critical success with his first two sea narratives, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847). The earlier Polynesian writing had reflected to some degree his experiences as a sailor and beachcomber in the South Pacific, where Melville had spent time after deserting a whaleship. In fact, *Typee* and *Omoo* were presented to the reading public as narratives of experience, rather than novels; yet they were held to be fantastic by many reviewers, many of whom shared the judgment of one early commentator: “We cannot escape a slight suspicion . . . that there is an indefinite amount of romance mingled with the reality of his narrative.”¹ The seemingly opposed generic categories of “romance” and “narrative” used to identify his first two works are explicitly taken up by Melville in the brief note that opens *Mardi*. Here, Melville refers to the reception of the earlier sea narratives in terms of such formal distinctions: “Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity,” he begins, “the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such.” His goal in doing so, he writes somewhat wryly, is “to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity; in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.” Aiming for “the reverse” of his previous experience, Melville would achieve it in ironic and unanticipated fashion: whereas *Typee* and *Omoo* were well-received bestsellers, *Mardi* mystified reviewers and frustrated readers. Yet in the preface Melville proposes to anticipate such misreading, and “this thought,” he concludes, “was the germ of others, which have resulted in *Mardi*.” What Melville sees as the misapprehension of the expectation of his novels is presented as generative rather than disheartening.

To think of *Mardi* as the result of willfully playful or genre-bending energies is itself, in turn, a productive way to consider Melville’s relationship to maritime writing and, more broadly, to the nineteenth-century novel. The

generic terms Melville uses to characterize his published work in *Mardi*'s preface would be familiar to his contemporary readers: *Typee* and *Omoo* are identified as "narratives," and thus factual accounts, and *Mardi* itself is designed as a "romance," the form of the American novel made popular by writers such as Cooper and Hawthorne.^a The intermingling of fact and fiction characteristic of Melville's three Polynesian novels was also a hallmark of the early American novel.^b In the mid-1840s literary world in which Melville's first works were published, the forms of the narrative and the romance were both adapted in the service of maritime writing.

This chapter takes up Melville's interest in the generic forms and presumptions of sea writing and of popular novels more generally. It refers in some degree to all of his sea writing, including *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi*, *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850); special attention is paid to *Moby-Dick* (1851), even as this chapter provides a genealogy for Melville's sea novels whose trajectory does not presume a logical or inevitable end in that brilliantly experimental work. There is a structural distinctiveness in the genre of sea writing, one that Melville perceives, theorizes, and redeploys in the service of a reorientation of the form of the novel. What is distinct about sea writing is in part the novelty of the experience it represents: the facts of nautical life conveyed by sea literature would be new, if not inaccessible, to land-based readers. More to the point, nautical facts – in all their minute and obscure detail – are fundamental to the genre of sea writing. No matter the individual forms maritime writing takes, the specificity of the details of nautical verisimilitude is central to the structure of the works. In sea literature, in other words, fact and fancy (or truth and imagination) are not just formal categories, but instead are the source of productive tensions that animate the genre.

While water has always provided a medium for metaphorical reflection, Melville's writing shares with maritime literature a fastidious interest in the material facts of labor at sea. The experience or knowledge of the conditions of maritime labor becomes the hallmark of the sea novel in its technical language and descriptions of nautical practices.² An imaginative or fictive response to the sea, in turn, only succeeds through a recognition of the material conditions of nautical labor in its collaborative nature. This quality for the most part has gone unrecognized by a reading public whose interest in nautical writing's scenes of novelty and adventure preclude the possibility

a Jonathan Arac describes the genealogy of the romance in "Hawthorne and the aesthetics of American romance," chapter 8, 135–136.

b For examples and analysis of such "factual fictions," see Paul Giles, "Transatlantic currents and the invention of the American novel," chapter 1, 22–23.

of a novelty of form. Melville's recognition of what is innovative in the genre of sea writing, more broadly, has a social as well as categorical dimension, which can be used to take up issues such as sentiment, sexuality, race, empire, and class – and the chapter therefore considers also the implications of Melville's frustration of generic expectations in the form of his domestic novel *Pierre* (1852) and riparian novel *The Confidence-Man* (1857).

Melville was a diagnostic reader of sea writing and of its place in literary culture, and his own sea fictions can be read within the context of the two generations of maritime writing that preceded his work, such as James Fenimore Cooper's eleven popular sea novels.^c Other forms of maritime writing predate the sea novel. A variety of genres provided aesthetic conceptions of the ocean as well as literary expression for nautical experience, such as first-person narratives of working sailors, and the ephemeral ballads, chanteys, pamphlet novels, seaman-directed religious tracts, and pirate tales that also circulated in the antebellum literary public sphere. Colonial encounters with the Americas were necessarily sea voyages, and narratives of such nautical passages presented the sea as space for providential deliverance (or punishment), or for economic opportunity.³ Sensational accounts of such events as storms, shipwrecks, or North African captivity were popular from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the federal era writers such as Philip Freneau (in his many nautical-themed poems), Susanna Rowson (in her play *Slaves in Algiers* [1794]), and Royall Tyler (in his novel *The Algerine Captive* [1797]) used the sea as a stage for nationalist projects, while the eighteenth-century Black Atlantic was a feature of the writings of Olaudah Equiano, Venture Smith, and John Jea, whose narratives described their authors' fraught circulation throughout the Atlantic world.⁴

The origin of the novel of the sea can be seen as coincident with the origin of the novel: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) has been considered (most influentially by Ian Watt) the first novel in English. It shares with nonfictional maritime writing a close attention to the minutiae of nautical practice, and like some early maritime writing, *Crusoe* represents the sea as a sphere of providential deliverance or punishment. More directly, the genealogy of the American sea novel can be traced to the mid-eighteenth-century picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett, whose grotesque rendering of sailors was also reinforced in popular cartoons, ballads, and plays. Walter Scott's novel *The*

c Although rarely read today, Cooper's sea novels – and his several naval histories – were in many ways as popular and as well received as his Leatherstocking tales (which are discussed by Sandra Gustafson in "Cooper and the idea of the Indian," chapter 6).

Pirate (1821) marks a turning point in the fictional portrayal of sailors, as the travails of the titular buccaneer Captain Cleveland take the form of historical romance, a genre James Fenimore Cooper adapted for the first American sea novels.⁵

Cooper's sea fiction was written as a response to Scott's novel, which Cooper found insufficiently expert in nautical matters, as he recorded in a late-career revised preface to his first sea novel, *The Pilot* (1823). His maritime romances served as a model for many mid- to late-century cheap fictions – enjoyed by sailors – by popular writers such as Joseph Holt Ingraham and Ned Buntline (nautical pen name of Edward C. Z. Judson).^d The “nautical romances” of the late 1820s and 1830s generally credited Cooper as an influence, but not in the manner he might have intended, as working seamen found Cooper's picture of maritime labor to be as inaccurate as Cooper had found Scott's.⁶ Sailor memoirists of the antebellum period (including those who had served in the largely maritime War of 1812) sought a corrective to the romantic and inexperienced portrayal of life and work at sea provided by Cooper, who had served briefly in the Navy but could not claim substantial maritime experience. The narrative that best fit this expectation – and one that would become the best-known and most important sailor narrative of the period, and a huge influence on Melville – was *Two Years before the Mast* (1840) by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., a Harvard student who went to sea “before the mast,” or as a common working seaman, to cure eye problems presumed to be caused by too much reading. Dana's attention to the sea as a place for labor, as well as a place for contemplation, set off a wave of imitations, and became characteristic of the narratives written by American sailors of the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Just as Cooper tried to improve on the nautical authenticity provided by Scott's writing, and in turn was revised by subsequent sailor writing, Dana's narrative itself spurred an increased interest in the supposed facts of life at sea, rather than the romance of it. A shared sense of what was “productive” about the truth of maritime life would be a point of “affectionate sympathy” between Dana and Melville, who called Dana his “sea-brother” in their correspondence and thanked him for suggesting that he write up “the ‘whaling voyage.’”⁸

The admixture of fact and fancy in Melville's novels was crafted from a variety of material, including many first-person sailor narratives; Melville

d Buntline was also a hugely prolific writer of city mysteries, Westerns, and other dime novels, as Shelley Streeby details in “Dime novels and the rise of mass market genres,” chapter 35, 589–591.

borrowed widely from books about the sea in his fictions.⁹ Scholars, most visibly David S. Reynolds, have generally concluded that Melville adapted and revised his source material to create works elevated from and more “literary” than their origins.¹⁰ But such a judgment neglects the composite and collaborative nature of sea writing, which is analogous to sea labor in its collective practices. If Melville relied heavily on other works about the sea, he did so in accordance with the conventions of maritime writing. The “Extracts” that open *Moby-Dick*, for example, are designed to advertise and place such influences at hand. The recurrent tension between factual narrative and romance in Melville’s fiction constitutes a substantiation of the special structural properties of sea writing: labor and contemplation are simultaneous and collective, both in maritime writing and in maritime work. His critical attention to the genre is notable, even though the form of the sea narrative has received little scrutiny, whether in Melville’s day or in ours. And yet viewing Melville’s work within its most salient generic context brings into focus Melville’s compulsion to test the elasticity of the genre. What happens, Melville’s novels seem to ask, when the expectations and codes of a literary genre are stretched to their furthest point? In what follows, this chapter discusses Melville’s novels in an effort to explore the structural radicalism he identifies in sea writing and deploys, and tests, in his own works.

Polynesia, and three voyages thither

Typee describes a sojourn on the South Pacific island of Nukuheva in the Marquesas that begins when the narrator, known as “Tommo,” jumps ship along with his friend, Toby. They seek a respite in the Typee valley from oppressive life aboard a long-voyaging ship, hoping that their hosts are not cannibals, as they fear. Tommo soon settles into an Edenic existence with the Typee, companionably lounging and recreating with the lovely Fayaway and the attentive Kory-Kory (Toby having mysteriously disappeared). More an ethnography than a nautical narrative, *Typee* resembles the South Sea romances described by Jonathan Lamb in *Preserving the Self in the South Seas* (2001) in its emphasis not on the superiority of the social and political structures of the white travelers, but on the feelings of disruption, confusion, and displacement they experience.¹¹

The novel tests the limits of respectability in various ways, particularly in its critique of Christianizing impulses and Western senses of sexual and bodily propriety, and in its representation of Kory-Kory’s onanistic fire-making session. Tommo’s role as narrator presents similar challenges – and not just

because we never learn his true name, nor even come to the name “Tommo” itself until later in the book. In the first chapter, the narrator cites several then-well-known sea narratives by David Porter, Charles S. Stewart, and William Ellis (whose works would continue to provide Melville with source material in his future novels), but then claims that he “never happened to meet with” Porter’s naval memoir before. This impish and manifestly untrue statement is just the first of what will become in Melville’s novels a serial and unreliable disavowal of narrative control, method, or genealogy, even as his works adhere to templates provided by sea literature. Just as Tommo fears facial tattooing but is willing to offer his arm – which would be concealed by Western shirts – to a Typee tattoo artist, Melville’s novels themselves offer one face to the world and tease the reader with the “hieroglyphics” that undergird their formal structure.

In *Omoo*, the follow-up to *Typee*, this narrative coyness continues, as the name “Tommo” is discarded and the narrator is called variously Typee or Paul, or perhaps more generally Omoo, a Polynesian word that means “rover.” (The progression of narrative aliases finds its apotheosis in *Moby-Dick*, in which the narrator famously invites the reader: “Call me Ishmael.”) *Omoo* takes up where *Typee* leaves off, and critics celebrated its easy, engaging, sailor style, seeing its author as the “American Rabelais.”¹² Melville himself described the narrative as presenting “the ‘man about town’ sort of life, led, at the present day, by roving sailors in the Pacific – a kind of thing, which I have never seen described anywhere.”¹³

The popular and critical reception of Melville’s first two novels did not always recognize the terms of his engagement with the formal aspects of nautical literature. During the composition of *Mardi*, Melville began to articulate the problems and frustrations with literary form and the literary marketplace that would become recurrent themes of his later novels, his correspondence, and the critical response to his work. In a letter to John Murray, his London publisher, Melville describes how a “change in [his] determinations” would produce a different sort of sea novel than *Typee* or *Omoo*:

To be blunt: the work I shall next publish will in downright earnest [be] a “Romance of Polynesian Adventure” – But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation of being a romancer in disguise has at last pricked me into a resolution to show those who may take any interest in the matter, that a *real* romance of mine is no Typee or Omoo, & is made of different stuff altogether.¹⁴

In this pronouncement Melville paradoxically embraces the formal label with which he has been tagged, and simultaneously disavows it. He maintains that he must disrupt expectations, and *Mardi* makes good on this promise. The book does indeed, as Melville wrote to Murray, “open like a true narrative,”¹⁵ as the narrator, later called Taji, finds himself jumping ship (like Tommo and *Omoo*’s narrator before him) with an older sailor, Jarl. They fall in with a Polynesian ship that has survived a mutiny, and upon encountering a mysterious white maiden named Yillah, Taji pursues her futilely across the Mardi archipelago.

At this point *Mardi* departs from the conventions of South Sea romances, and away from those of sea fiction more generally. Accompanied by his loquacious Mardian companions King Media, Babbalanja (a philosopher), Mohi (a historian), and Yoomy (a poet), Taji and his companions spend the remainder of the novel engaged in satirical and philosophical speculation and debate. In this sense *Mardi* has been seen as a precursor to the metaphysical reflections in *Moby-Dick* and in *Pierre*. Formally, the novel is as open-ended as its plot, although the rewards of Melville’s fictional toils were few: *Mardi* proved to be a critical disappointment for being too wild – exceeding Melville’s prediction that it would be “wild enough” – in its formal innovations and its turn toward metaphysics. In its double reversal of “verity” and success, *Mardi* is not unlike Edgar Allan Poe’s sea novel of the previous decade, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837), which itself had had a mixed reception on the grounds of its presumed lack of veracity and formal coherence.¹⁶ A description in *Mardi* of the famed Mardian poet Lombardo’s work as unplanned and chartless, even incomplete, would become a common theme in Melville’s descriptions of his own narrative method in his future fictional output, most familiarly in *Moby-Dick* (“For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught – nay, but the draught of a draught”). Yet before *Moby-Dick*, Melville produced two further sea adventures, novels that restored to some degree the critical and popular good name bruised by *Mardi*.

Writing the other way

Melville himself notoriously dismissed *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* as “jobs,”¹⁷ akin to chopping wood. Yet the novels present attitudes toward the construction of literary monuments that are similar – if not quite identical – to that seen in *Moby-Dick*. When the irredeemably naïve Wellingborough Redburn finds

that the guidebook to Liverpool that his dead father had left him is out of date and thus worthless, he reflects, “For the cope-stone of to-day is the cornerstone of to-morrow; and as St. Peter’s church was built in great part of the ruins of old Rome, so in all our erections, however imposing, we but form quarries and supply ignoble materials for the grander domes of posterity.” In this passage, as in the similar one above, Melville describes the process of literary composition as necessarily fragmented and indefinite. The architectural metaphors in *Redburn* and *Moby-Dick* (and also in *Pierre*¹⁸) suggest, however, that the “grand” or “true” work will achieve some kind of completion or perfection in an unattainable future. Yet for young Redburn, who has embarked on a transatlantic merchant voyage in the face of his family’s financial distress, there is little hope that his father’s expired guidebook will be future material, however “ignoble,” for any monument. The guidebook is one of many unreliable texts in circulation in the novel – and many of the rest are maritime materials.

Redburn’s shipmates, whom he had presumed to be pious men, in fact read the kind of coarse materials popular with seamen, such as *The Newgate Calendar* (an infamous annual crime report), *The Pirate’s Own Book* (an anthology of pirate tales) and mystical “Dream Books” of sham navigation. Redburn himself brings along Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* on his cruise, yet he soon finds that it serves better as a pillow than as nautical reading matter. Melville’s invocation of maritime sources in *Typee* and his earlier works is redoubled in *Redburn*, but with a difference: rather than demonstrating a legible genealogy of influence, the texts Melville cites in *Redburn* and in many of his later novels do not necessarily hasten the completion of any given project, whether intellectual or literary.¹⁹ In this sense the novel can be seen as a *Bildungsroman* in reverse, in which the protagonist gains no knowledge and ends up owing money by the novel’s end.

Redburn toys with the expectations of the maritime initiation narrative in another way: Wellingborough Redburn is presented with several sexual signs, cues, and invitations from his shipmates, but fails to process their import. For this reason, he is unlike the sailors of Melville’s other novels, or those in maritime writing more generally, whose own expressions of queer sexuality or homosocial love (however encoded) are recognized and recognizable by fellow sailors and by many readers.²⁰ For Redburn these expressions are all opaque, whether the actions of his “perfectly formed” friend Harry Bolton, whom he first encounters “standing in the doorways” of seaport boarding houses; the nature of Aladdin’s Palace, the homosexual brothel to which Harry takes him in London (and which Redburn’s wildest imagination can

only suspect is a gambling den); or his response to the power of the splendid organ of the beautiful Italian boy Carlo. Melville had earlier faced some censorship in *Typee* for crossing lines of propriety in his representations of religion and the sexuality of the island women, but his repeated invocations of queer sexuality were never censored. Indeed, they become progressively more explicit in and central to his works, as Melville continued to push the bounds of the sea novel. Push, but not puncture, for other sailors' narratives documented, in their own oblique way, the "situational homosexuality" (to use the term more recently applied to sailors, soldiers, prisoners, and athletes) common to shipboard life.

Melville had promised his publisher that *Redburn* would be all "cakes & ale," "no metaphysics,"²¹ and indeed, it is arguably his funniest work. Yet its humor depends in part upon the reader's recognition of the novel's deviation from what would be the standard formula of sea narratives and other narratives of experience: the acquisition and deployment of knowledge. While many sailor tales are light and comic, the source of the comedy in *Redburn* is its first-person narrator's own ineptitude, rather than the high spirit of life at sea. Even in *White-Jacket*, in which the narrator is a more skilled seaman than the beggarly Redburn, the jacket that gives the narrator his moniker is a joke: a composite, ill-fitting, and utterly unseaworthy garment pieced together by circumstance. *White-Jacket* was written and published quickly, just as *Redburn* had been, and draws again from Melville's own nautical experience, this time his return to the USA aboard an American man-of-war; the novel primarily focuses on the ill-treatment and arbitrary violence suffered by sailors at the hands of naval officers. In the novel's dramatic close, White-Jacket survives a fall from the main topgallant yardarm, a plunge precipitated by the jacket. Only upon cutting himself free from the garment (which is then mistaken for a white shark and harpooned by his mates) does the narrator save himself. The jacket answers to all purposes save the one it is supposed to – keeping its wearer warm and dry. In its multiply-stuffed pockets, sprawling and incomplete tailoring, voluminous matter, and dedication to utility – however inadequately realized – the jacket's best metaphorical role may be as a stand-in for the form of the sea narrative.

Moby-Dick, Melville's next novel, shares the jacket's formal motley. It models a variety of narrative forms, and references to books or other texts proliferate. The Usher inaugurates the novel with his grammar books; the Sub-Sub Librarian presents the fruits of his textual research in the Extracts; and once Ishmael's voice commandeers the narrative, the endlessly multiplying bibliography that makes up the "grand programme" of *Moby-Dick* is

increasingly detailed for the reader. Whales are classified as books, with their skin, foreheads, and various bodily parts potentially legible; other texts to be read in the novel include the doubloon, the coffin-lifebuoy, Ahab, the whale's forehead, and Ishmael's and Queequeg's tattoos. This narrative urge to catalogue has been frequently noted in criticism on *Moby-Dick*, although its practice has been general throughout Melville's fiction. In this sense, we might think of the novel as a commonplace book for seamen's experience, a demonstration of the collectivity of their labor and of their literary engagement.

Constant attrition

While "Call me Ishmael" is routinely cited as the opening line of *Moby-Dick*, the novel in fact opens with the line: "The pale Usher – threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now." The opening sections "Etymology" (which traces the genealogy of the word "whale") and "Extracts" (which cites various reference to whales in literary history) serve as composite introductions to *Moby-Dick*. Their mixed form forecasts the heterogeneity of the novel itself, as readers are faced with the task of reconciling the action-driven revenge plot with Melville's mazy dissertations on the science and literature of whaling. But as "Etymology" and "Extracts" suggest, a balanced accounting of these different registers is neither an easy nor, perhaps, a desired task. The etymologies provided by the consumptive Usher for the word "whale" themselves are inconsistent, which suggests that the book's interest in taxonomy has no fixed end, no necessary unity, accrete as it will. The quotations about whales that follow in the Extracts, likewise furnished by a fictional character (a "Sub-Sub Librarian"), are themselves "random" and "higgledy-piggledy." They forecast the contingent nature of the encyclopedism of the novel to follow. More to the point, the Extracts call attention to the existence of a body of maritime knowledge that circulates in literature as well as in labor. If the Etymology and the Extracts are an archive of information about whaling, drawn from philology, taxonomy, natural history, and literature, then Melville's sea novels themselves can be seen as commonplace books of seamen's experiential knowledge.

Throughout *Moby-Dick* Melville aligns the science of whaling with the practice of reading and writing books. A prime example of this comes in the chapter "Cetology," which finds Ishmael cataloguing whales in terms of book formats, identifying the largest whales as folios and the smallest as duodecimos. His categorization system is designed, in part, to preserve himself from

the sea's "unshored, harborless immensities"; but as Ishmael acknowledges, he is essaying "the classification of the constituents of a chaos." As such, taxonomies of this sort must always be in "draught" form, like the narrative itself ("a draught of a draught") – for as Ishmael reiterates in various ways throughout the novel, "any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty." By reason of the fact that they are in draft form, the classification systems at play in *Moby-Dick* invite a reader's participatory labor in the reading process; "I am the architect, not the builder," Ishmael reminds the reader. Assimilation of the terms and disparate elements of the novel incorporates the reader into the *work* of the broader genre of the sea narrative – the manual labor that operates the ship, as well as the intellectual labor exemplified by the sailor's engagement with the materiality of texts.

"Cetology" is one of many chapters that dramatize the work of interpreting texts. In "The Doubloon," the second mate Stubb – the *Pequod's* resident materialist – theorizes the seamen's varied approaches to the task of interpretation. Ahab had nailed a doubloon to the mast, promised as a reward for the first sailor to spot Moby Dick. As the crew members pause to contemplate the coin, Stubb records how the men approach the text and images on the Ecuadoran gold coin variously; each provides "another rendering" of the "one text" that is the doubloon. Each reading, too, is an experiential one, speaking to the individual crew member's ideology or prejudice. Ahab sees himself exemplified in the coin's tower, volcano, and cock, for example, while pious Starbuck sees God's divinity; Queequeg marks traces of the doubloon's symbols on his own tattooed flesh; and Stubb's own reading is astrological. This act of simultaneous reading prompts Stubb's apostrophe: "Book! you lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts." In putting books in their places, Stubb makes clear that the works he cites are themselves reference books of the mathematic, navigational, astrological, or meteorological symbols relied upon by seamen. Yet the active work of thinking must be done by the reader. Playfulness is not disallowed in this equation: as Pip's contribution to the readings of the doubloon reminds us, if the doubloon is the ship's navel, and all are "on fire to unscrew it," the consequence of such an act, colloquially, is that one's bottom will fall off (and out). Even in the face of such potential bottomlessness, as *Moby-Dick* insists, taxonomies or classifications must be dynamic and participatory. This formulation is derived by Melville from his reading of sailor narratives, whose commonplaces provide the "bare words and facts" of *Moby-Dick*.

One of the most memorable passages in the novel comes in “The Quarter-Deck,” in which Ahab reveals to the crew that the true mission of their voyages is not a general whale hunt, but their captain’s inexorable search for the legendary white whale that had taken his leg. Among the crew there is one principal objector, the upright first mate Starbuck, who thinks that taking “vengeance on a dumb brute” is absurd, even blasphemous. In response, Ahab famously rationalizes his pursuit:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask . . . That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.

Ahab has little curiosity about the unfathomable force that governs action in the world; the “unknown but still reasoning thing” that determines causality is for him only something to hate and destroy. The question of whether *Moby-Dick*’s seeming malice toward Ahab originated with the whale, or with some broader, unseen force on whose behalf the whale acted, in other words, is not relevant to him.

Ahab’s relative indifference to questions of causality stands in marked contrast to a comparable passage in *Pierre* (1852), in which Pierre Glendinning decides that a fateful letter he has received from a woman claiming to be his half-sister must be truthful. Like Ahab, Pierre perceives a distance between the visible surface of things and their unaccountable depths; but unlike Ahab, Pierre wishes not to strike blindly through the concealing mask, but to see and know its wearer. As he comes to his determination to believe Isabel Banford’s story of her paternity, Pierre declares,

I will lift my hand in fury, for am I not struck? . . . Thou Black Knight, that with visor down, thus confrontest me, and mockest at me; lo! I strike through thy helm, and will see thy face, be it Gorgon! . . . From all idols, I tear all veils; henceforth I will see the hidden things; and live right out in my own hidden life!

Generic distinctions can help explain the difference between Ahab’s drive to obliterate causality without perceiving it, and Pierre’s desire to commit violence in order to expose causality: if sea narratives are above all interested in the mutually sustaining work of labor and contemplation, then Ahab’s failure in *Moby-Dick* might be seen to lie not in his misplaced attribution of agency to the whale, but in his failure to do his job. In other words, Ahab’s

reasoning is distorted when he abandons the whaling mission, as the epistemology of sea writing depends upon the experience of maritime labor.

A wholly separate epistemology governs *Pierre*, which takes the form of a domestic novel of sentiment and sensation.^e The work failed commercially and critically, in part because of its scandalous representations of incest. Much of the scholarly debate on *Pierre* has focused on whether Melville was trying sincerely to write a sentimental novel and not succeeding, or whether he intended the work more bitterly as an attack on the popular form.²² But while set far from the sea, this novel, too, finds Melville exploring what is possible within the given terms and expectations of a genre. In the majority of sentimental novels, the heroine eventually marries a young man who has been in her life as a brother figure, or a cousin, or a father figure. If we think of Melville as working consciously within the genre of the sentimental novel, then the relationships between Pierre and Isabel (and Pierre and his mother, and Pierre and his cousin Glen) follow this logic to its final point: the resultant relationships must be incestuous.

Critics and readers found *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* to be, in a sense, confidence games, engaging a reader's expectations about what form each of the novels should take. Yet we might see Melville not so much violating the reader's expectations as retraining the reader to see the elasticity of possibility within a given genre – or the logical extrapolation of what the form might dictate. What Melville seems to have most chafed at in terms of his market reputation was the idea that his novels failed out of poor planning or inconsistency. He would return to this theme in *The Confidence-Man*. The work consists of a sequence of exchanges (both dialogic and financial) between passengers on a Mississippi steamboat and a confidence man who assumes a variety of forms. In a chapter whose title advertises its circular logic – “Worth the Consideration of Those to whom it May Prove Worth Considering” – Melville reflects on fiction's requirements for characters, including the idea that “while to all fiction is allowed some play of invention, yet, fiction based on fact should never be contradictory to it; and is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*?” *The Confidence-Man* is marked throughout by this very unwillingness to mediate between the contradictory demands for fiction to be consistent and yet truthful. The paradox in many ways revisits the question of whether fiction exemplifies fact or fancy that had marked Melville's early writing career; it remained unsolvable for him.

e Cindy Weinstein discusses novels of sentiment more generally, and *Pierre* in particular, in chapter 12, “Sentimentalism”; see esp. 214.

After *The Confidence-Man* Melville would publish no further novels in his lifetime.^f Often quoted is one of his letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne, written as he was completing *Moby-Dick*, in which he makes the aching confession that “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.” Yet immediately preceding these sentences is a less familiar but arguably more evocative fear about the process of writing: “I shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg.”²³ Melville does not characterize himself here as the nutmeg, the thing that is ground down – which would be the assumption in such a metaphor. Instead, he is the nutmeg-grater: the engine of production. Rather than the substance shredded by the critics, Melville is the shaper shredded by the effort of his craft. The figure of the nutmeg recurs within the text of *Moby-Dick*, too. In “The Chase – Second Day,” Stubb’s and Flask’s boats are destroyed by the whale, and the broken bits of the cedar wreckage resemble “the grated nutmeg in a swiftly stirred bowl of punch.” The startling image, in its evocation of sociable cheer, is an odd flourish to a scene of devastation. But like the grater invoked by Melville in his letter to Hawthorne, this nutmeg serves as a reminder of the presence of the shaping hand that resists being ground down by convention and critical expectation. The figure stands in for Melville’s career as a novelist: he inhabits a form that ultimately cannot maintain its constitutional integrity in the face of its work as the fashioning agent for the matter contained within.

Notes

1. *Harbinger, Devoted to Social and Political Progress* 2.17 (April 4, 1846): 263.
2. For more on the structure of maritime labor, see C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985); Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
3. The overview of sea writing in this section has been aided by Thomas Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961); Haskell Springer, *America and the Sea: A Literary History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Bert Bender, *Sea-Brothers*

^f For a discussion of the posthumously published *Billy Budd*, see Gregg Crane, “Law and the American novel,” chapter 46 in this volume, 768.

- (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Robert Foulke, *The Sea Voyage Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1997); and John Peck, *Maritime Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000).
4. On the subject of such narratives, see David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2003); Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and the anthology *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews (Washington, DC: Civitas, 1998).
 5. On the development of sea writing in America, see my *The View from the Masthead* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction*; and Springer, *America and the Sea*.
 6. Sailor author Nathaniel Ames spoke for many when he condemned the “ridiculous language” used by Cooper in rendering sailor speech, finding Cooper’s “sea dialogues” to be “disgusting and absurd, from being stuffed with sea phrases.” Nathaniel Ames, *A Mariner’s Sketches* (Providence, RI: Cory Marshall and Hammond, 1830), 238–239.
 7. See my *The View from the Masthead*.
 8. Melville to Richard Henry Dana, October 6, 1849, in *Correspondence*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern-Newberry, 1993), 141; Melville to Richard Henry Dana, May 1, 1850, *ibid.*, 162.
 9. A few of his most frequently used sources include William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833); J. Ross Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846); David Porter, *A Voyage in the South Seas, in the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814 with Particular Details of the Gallipagos and Washington Islands* (London: Phillips & Co., 1823); Anon., *Life in a Man-of-War, or Scenes in “Old Ironsides” during her cruise in the Pacific* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1841); and C. S. Stewart, *Private Journal of a Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, and residence at the Sandwich Islands, in the years 1822, 1823, 1824, and 1825* (New York: John P. Haven, 1828).
 10. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
 11. Jonathan Lamb, *Preserving the Self in the South Seas, 1680–1840* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Other compelling readings of the novel, such as those by Samuel Otter in *Melville’s Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and by Geoffrey Sanborn in *The Sign of the Cannibal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), stress *Typee*’s exploration of race, ideology, and the body.
 12. Philarète Chasles, “The Actual and Fantastic Voyages of Herman Melville,” *Literary World* [New York], 131 (August 4, 1849): 89.
 13. Melville to John Murray, January 29, 1847, *Correspondence*, 78.
 14. Melville to John Murray, March 25, 1848, *Correspondence*, 106.

15. *Ibid.*
16. Melville's preface to *Mardi* echoes Poe's to *Pym* in many ways, as the character "Pym" worries in his narrative's introduction about "the probability . . . that the public at large would regard what I should put forth as merely an impudent and ingenious fiction." Presenting it to the public as fiction, "Pym" finds, has the opposite effect: "the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as fable." Elizabeth Young, on the other hand, reads *Pym* as pure fable – specifically, a fiction of race – in "Supernatural novels," chapter 13 in this volume, 223–225.
17. Melville to Lemuel Shaw, October 6, 1849, *Correspondence*, 138.
18. Pierre, on contemplating his ancestral legacy:
- For in the ruddiness, and flushfulness, and vaingloriousness of his youthful soul, he fondly hoped to have a monopoly of glory in capping the fame-column, whose tall shaft had been erected by his noble sires. In all this, how unadmonished was our Pierre by that foreboding and prophetic lesson taught, not less by Palmyra's quarries, than by Palmyra's ruins. Among those ruins is a crumbing, uncompleted shaft, and some leagues off, ages ago left in the quarry, is the crumbling corresponding capital, also incomplete.
19. See Michael Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983).
20. See Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
21. Melville to Richard Bentley, June 5, 1849, *Correspondence*, 132.
22. See in particular Cindy Weinstein, *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Richard H. Brodhead, *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
23. Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne, [June 1 ?], 1951, *Correspondence*, 191. On Melville's tortured relationship to the act of writing, see Elizabeth Renker's *Strike Through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).