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Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

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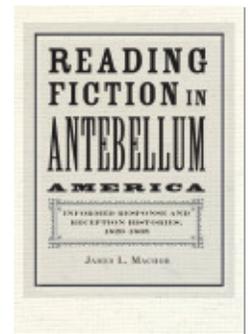
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Multiple Audiences and Melville's Fiction

Receptions, Recoveries, and Regressions

IF EDGAR ALLAN POE had one of the keenest senses of audience among antebellum fiction writers, Herman Melville was not far behind. Though never as obsessive as Poe in conceptualizing his readership, Melville came to fiction writing through experiences that helped make him aware of, and at times deeply sensitive to, audience responses to his tales.¹ Those encounters were initially oral and face-to-face, first aboard the whale ships and the man-of-war he sailed on from 1840 to 1844 and then at home in Lansingburgh, New York, where he found opportunities and encouragement to hone his story-telling abilities by relating to family and friends narratives of his nautical exploits.² Ultimately, however, the same public discussion in which Poe was involved became Melville's main index to ideas about his relation to readers. While never an inveterate reader of periodicals or deeply involved in the world of reviewing, Melville was—or would become with the publication of his first novel, *Typee*—habitually drawn to reviews of his own fiction. He developed from them not only a sense of informed reading but also a rough working conception of the audience he would need to engage with his narratives.³ Melville, in fact, is a striking case of a writer whose career in the antebellum literary marketplace—involving the reception of his fictions and his conceptions of his craft—was shaped by the way his fiction was read and discussed in the public sphere. For those conceptions underwent significant changes amid the shifting seas of his public reception during his fiction-writing career in the 1840s and 1850s.

Scholars and critics over the past seventy-five years have largely agreed about the pattern of that career. Melville began in 1845 as a writer seeking popular success, but during the growth of his literary ambitions while composing *Moby-Dick* (or, as some maintain, as early as *Mardi*)

he reconceived the role of the fiction writer as a kind of double agent (or aesthetic confidence man) who composed for two audiences, which he defined in his 1850 essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses” as the “superficial skimmer of pages” and the “eagle-eyed reader.”⁴ However, in the wake of disappointing sales and responses, first to *Mardi* and then two to three years later to *Moby-Dick*, Melville grew increasingly antagonistic toward his contemporary readership to the point where he virtually turned his back on his audience before abandoning his career as a professional fiction writer.⁵

As a critical consensus, this master narrative of Melville’s career has a hefty weight of credibility. Melville clearly was dismayed on a number of occasions with the responses to his books, referring to some reviewers at one point as “so many numskulls” and announcing in an 1849 letter to his friend Evert Duyckinck that “an author can never—under no conceivable circumstance—be at all frank with his readers.” In tones almost of despair, he lamented to Hawthorne two years later that “not one man in five cycles, who is wise, will expect appreciative recognition from his fellows, or any one of them. . . . [W]e pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended.”⁶ Moreover, his frustration and ambivalence toward the antebellum reading public waxed as Melville’s career wore on in the 1850s.

Nevertheless, this version of Melville’s relationship with his audience is both jaundiced and oversimplified. The two-tiered audience theory Melville articulated overtly in “Hawthorne and his Mosses” was not the product of a sudden inspiration charged by his galvanic encounter with Hawthorne’s stories in 1850. Melville had been thinking about multiple audiences since *Typee*. More importantly, he never acrimoniously abandoned the reading public during his fiction-writing career, nor did he even become exclusively—or even primarily—antagonistic toward his contemporary readers. Instead, amid a mixture of successes, disappointments, celebrations, and frustrations, Melville repeatedly sought to redefine for himself the nature and shape of the multiple audiences he projected, and he struggled to adjust his fictions to them. In this regard, Lawrence Buell has suggested that “our view of Melville may become more usefully complicated if we impute to him a multiple and shifting notion of the implied reader.”⁷ What needs attention is not only the shape

of that transforming projection but the angst and hopefulness that characterized Melville's attempts to wrestle with it in the face of the reception his works received.

In this facet of authorship some affinities between Melville and Poe certainly existed. Like Poe, Melville believed, at least in part, that authorship was "an exercise in freedom," as Wai-chee Dimock has put it;⁸ however, for Melville it was not a freedom from readerly control or a freedom by the writer to control the reader. It was a freedom to tell the truth to the audience—and if need be, at times, in spite of the audience. More than Poe, Melville also came to understand that authorial freedom vis-à-vis the fiction-reading public was more a matter of desire than a fully achievable end. He did not seek the kind of authorial domination over readers that Poe so ardently craved. To be sure, Melville had his egotisms, which included an attraction to the romanticized idea of imperial authorship.⁹ He also shared the conception within informed reading that the great writer was both a genius and a mesmerizer, and, like Poe, he could occasionally express contempt for popular appeal as "mere mob renown," as he disparagingly termed it in "Hawthorne and His Mosses."¹⁰ Melville, however, expressed in that essay his strong attraction to an idea of authorship as a practice that could "breathe the unshackled democratic spirit" (249), and he subscribed to the conception within informed reading that the great writer could speak to a broad and diverse audience, educating and entertaining readers of various stamps. For Melville, the majestic writer needed to be a democratic leader of learning and insight, who could guide the populace as a man of the people.¹¹

To say this is not to characterize Melville as a naive optimist about the fiction-reading public, the literary marketplace, or even his own abilities. Besides repeatedly struggling, as Elizabeth Renker has demonstrated, with the physical act of writing itself, Melville believed that "a certain tragic phase" marked the labors of any serious writer. However, his commitment to democratic authorship, enhanced by his attraction to the politics of liberal romanticism, fueled in him a belief that the truly democratic author would redefine the relationship between authorship and audience, the individual and the mass, the learned and the popular.¹²

To achieve that end Melville concluded that form would be a factor in any such engagement. As Ann Douglas has pointed out, Melville "increasingly grasped that the author meets his reader's expectations or

doesn't, earns his reader's trust or fails to, punishes or rewards his reader through form," since form offers "the negotiating ground for writer and reader."¹³ In this light, Sheila Post-Lauria has argued that Melville's novels themselves, especially in the way they combine genres and interlard forms, testify to Melville's desire to engage multiple audiences by supplying different elements to different types of readers.¹⁴ There is, of course, a problematic circularity in going to the novels themselves for evidence about implied audiences and strategies for engaging readers, since the evidence supposedly "in" those texts is itself a product of a reader's interpretive acts. Yet other indicators do exist to support the claim that Melville repeatedly engaged his readers in a variety of ways via shifting strategies—most notably his discursive remarks in letters to his publishers and literary confidantes, but also the very responses that constituted the core of his literary reception. In this regard a suggestive and representative index—if not to intention, at least to impact—comes in a comment in an 1857 review of the *Confidence-Man*. In looking over Melville's career as a fiction writer, this contributor to the British *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* explained that the novel's titular character is "like Mr. Melville in his earlier works," because in those previous fictions Melville "asks confidence of everybody under different masks of mendicancy, and is, on the whole, pretty successful."¹⁵ Whatever Melville's specific intentions were, his continual struggle to engage an audience led him to produce pre-texts that his contemporary readers repeatedly found to be composed of diverse forms that bespoke Melville's effort—often for ill as for good effect, according to the codes of informed reading—to redefine "under different masks" his relations with readers.

Melville's antebellum reception, therefore, is significant not only for what it tells us about what it meant to read his fiction before the Civil War or what such reading suggested to Melville about himself and his art. That reception also bears examination for what it indicates about the widespread twentieth-century critical interpretation of Melville as a writer increasingly alienated from his contemporary readership. For if that view is an oversimplification of the complexity of Melville's conception of audience, it is an interpretation that stems from the responses of antebellum readers and reviewers who, by the mid-1850s, were reading Melville as a writer increasingly prone to turn his back on his audience. Like their modern counterparts, a part of Melville's contemporary audi-

ence subscribed to such an interpretation of his fiction as a method for making sense of his career. The difference between the two resides in the fact that for twentieth-century scholars and students the alienated Melville they have constructed represents the tragically heroic Melville, misunderstood by his contemporaries and increasingly defiant of their simplistic responses, which trivialized his most ambitious work, from *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* to *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*. For antebellum readers, however, the disdainful Melville was an interpretive formulation developed to comprehend his later novels as a falling away from the early achievements of *Typee* and *Omoo*—a decline that resulted because a successful and promising writer had given up on his obligations to his craft and to his audience.



Antebellum readers certainly agreed with the twentieth-century view that Melville's first novel was composed for broad accessibility. A review in the *Charleston Southern Patriot* explained that *Typee* "reminds us of those delightful volumes of our boyhood, the voyages of Cook, Carteret, Byron and Anson, over the plates and pages of which we so loved to linger (Apr. 25, 1846, CR 47), while the *New York Morning News* said that it "has the sufficiency . . . to be one of the most agreeable, readable books of the day" (Mar. 18, 1846, CR 17–18). Such remarks were repeatedly echoed in the approximately 150 reviews of *Typee* that appeared in American magazines and newspapers from Maine to New Orleans—a number that made *Typee* Melville's most talked about novel. That public notoriety was matched by a popularity among the book-buying audience. The first American edition of two thousand copies rapidly sold out following its March 1846 appearance, and by January 1849 Wiley and Putnam, Melville's American publisher, had sold 6,380 copies of the 6,500 they had printed. Though not a bestseller when compared to such novels as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Wide, Wide World*, or *Ruth Hall*, *Typee* clearly was a popular success among middle-class readers and reviewers.¹⁶

If we ask what made *Typee* so popular, no single answer will do, but one factor certainly was the politics of American expansionism that gave the book a ringing topicality. U.S. involvement in the Pacific had been in the news since 1842 when the French sent a squadron of ships to annex the Marquesan Islands and Tahiti under protest from the United States, which had had interests in those archipelagoes ever since one

of its agents had unofficially claimed them for the United States nearly thirty years before. Only a year after the French action, an even larger controversy developed over the Hawaiian (a.k.a. Sandwich) Islands, when the British under Lord George Paulet provisionally claimed that group before “formally relinquishing” them to the United States later that year. Making such events especially newsworthy was President John Tyler’s declaration of U.S. policy in December 1842, which, for all intents and purposes, extended the Monroe Doctrine to the Pacific to include the Sandwich Islands. That look westward was part of an imperial design that included in this period the northwest section of Mexico and the Oregon Territory. Not insignificantly, the same issue of *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* that carried a brief review of *Typee* (May 4, 1846) also had a lengthy article on “The Value of Oregon,” helping to link Melville’s book with popular interest in America’s “Manifest Destiny.”¹⁷

Other reviewers were even more explicit in suturing Melville’s book to the logic of empire and the popular interest in the westward “destiny” of the United States. Referring to Polynesia as a “region [that] is destined to a rapid rise in Historical and Geographical importance” and where “[r]ecent events . . . have attracted much attention,” a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* alerted readers to “the work of Mr. Melville” by focusing on the passages of *Typee* that recount the “motives of the French occupation of Tahiti, and the provisional cessation of the Sandwich Islands to Lord Paulet” (Apr. 1846: 256). Similar connections appeared in a review of *Typee* in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* and the *Anglo American Magazine*.¹⁸ What such remarks indicate is that one attraction to *Typee* lay in the way readers found in it what they were looking for. Coming to the book with an interpretive expectation that any good narrative should have a didactic purpose, readers discovered in Melville’s volume information about far-flung places about which their interest already had been aroused.

Not that *Typee* was absolutely novel as a travel narrative offering a “peep” at its exotic locale. As the *Literary World* remarked a few years later, what readers found in Melville’s narrative was “pretty much the identical things” that had been available “in the pages of Bougainville, Onga, Ellis, and Earle.”¹⁹ Indeed, only a month before *Typee* was published in the United States, *Littell’s Living Age* ran a two-page review of John Coulter’s *Adventures in the Pacific*, which it described as a book

expressly meeting the expectations of “readers [who] feel a strange kind of interest in nautical adventure removed from the routine of civilization” (Jan. 1846: 71). From the early 1830s, following the publication of Charles Stewart’s *A Visit to the South Seas* (1831), the audience for an “informative treatment of the South Seas,” according to Leon Howard, was growing, and to meet that readership “travel literature dealing with the region had been increasing in quantity for more than a decade.”²⁰ This lack of novelty in *Typee*, however, actually contributed to reader interest because readers could find in Melville’s book more of what they already had been exposed to and had thoroughly enjoyed. That pleasurable redundancy involved the information they discovered in *Typee* as well as fulfillment of expectations about genre, since the public reception of *Typee* linked it to *Robinson Crusoe*, the foremost travel narrative of adventurous encounters with the exotic, which was a favorite with antebellum readers. From the *New York Weekly Tribune* and *Daily and Weekly Mirror* to the *Richmond Enquirer*, *Cincinnati Morning Herald*, and *Washington National Intelligencer*, reviewers repeatedly remarked on the similarity between *Typee* and Daniel Defoe’s narrative in both subject matter and treatment.²¹

Not to be ignored as a factor of popularity was another link readers made, only this one involved a different precedent available via periodical reviews. That factor consisted of the reviews of *Typee* in British magazines, which on the whole were quite positive. Melville was one of the few American authors at the time to circumvent the lack of international copyright laws by arranging for simultaneous publication of his novels in England and America. For his first six books—including *Typee*—that arrangement actually entailed having the British edition of each in print roughly a month before its American twin. Consequently, the first British reviews of any one novel had already made their way across the Atlantic and were available to both the novel-reading public and reviewers in America just as the American edition was coming off the presses. It was not uncommon, therefore, for the early American reviews of Melville’s first six books to refer (often approvingly) to what had been said about them in the *London Spectator*, *Athenaeum*, and *John Bull*. For *Typee* that meant that the laudatory British responses were already available as a precedent facilitating American enthusiasm about the narrative.²²

Placing *Typee* in relation to previous works enabled readers to see

it as, among other things, an adventure narrative, a travelogue, and a nautical reminiscence, and for some reviewers this diversity was a central part of the book's charm. As the *New York Morning News* explained, "Typee, in fact, is a happy hit whichever way you look at it, whether as travel, romance, poetry, or humor" (Mar. 18, 1846, CR 17). For others, however, such a diversity marked a problem because it raised uncertainty about exactly what genre *Typee* belonged to. One troubling dimension of this concern involved a question first raised by several British reviews. Although John Murray, Melville's British publisher, had put out the book as part of his Home and Colonial Library, which consisted entirely of works of nonfiction, several British reviewers wondered if *Typee* was an authentic autobiographical work.²³ By April, similar doubts were being raised in the *New York Evangelist* and the *Morning Courier*. Even the *Albany Argus*, which defended the book's authenticity, pointed out that some American readers were taking *Typee* as "a beautiful fiction" that was "too strange to be true" (Apr. 21, 1846, CR 47).

For some, the smoking musket lay in their encounter with the early part of the book, particularly the account of Melville/Tommo (the two had to be one if this were nonfiction) and Toby's jungle roving and descent into the Typee valley. The reviewer in the *National Intelligencer* thought that "[t]here is a great poetic exaggeration in the height of cliffs and waterfalls and the depth of chasms, across which our fugitives make their way to the vale of Typee" that did not square with what the reviewer had found in previous accounts, such as David Potter's 1815 *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean*. The *Intelligencer* also remarked that "the tumbling over the sides of precipices, so judiciously practiced by Herman and Toby . . . is a thing which has no possibility out of romance. A more enormous sailor's *yarn* has seldom been heard" (May 27, 1847, CR 74). Nor was such doubt expressed only in public. In a letter, George Duyckinck reported reading the same section of the novel with a skepticism that prevented him from "taking it for sober verity." Duyckinck found that Melville's "exploits in descending the waterfalls beat Sam Patch," the legendary folk figure.²⁴

For others the problem was not any one part of the book; instead, it was the prevailing impression that the narrative read very much like a romance, a term that the *Southern Patriot*, the *Argus*, and the *Boston Universalist Review*, among others, applied to *Typee*. Here the interpre-

tive link to *Robinson Crusoe* proved as much of a problem as a boon, for if *Typee* were like Defoe's novel, then by generic affiliation it had to be fiction. Indeed, for some, the resemblance between *Typee* and other fictional travel narratives was clear. For a reviewer in the *Boston Post*, that meant placing *Typee* "with Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver" (May 5, 1847, CR 101). The *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer* went further, declaring overtly that *Typee* "is a fiction . . . from beginning to end" (Apr. 17, 1846, CR 46).

More was involved in this issue of the genre of *Typee* than mere taxonomy. Within the codes of informed reading, it was a question of how to interpret and value the book, including the implied role Melville was asking his readers to assume. Deciphering genre affected interpretations of what readers construed as the two key thematic or philosophical issues the book raised: the contrast between primitivism and civilization and the role of Christian missions in the Pacific islands. What was Melville saying about the civilized-primitive dichotomy and about the missionaries? Most readers agreed that some kind of criticism was going on in the treatment of both of these ideas in *Typee* but disagreed over what it was and what it portended.

A few reviewers interpreted *Typee* as an unconscionable attack on missionary work in the Pacific and by extension an unacceptable attack on Christianity itself. As several Melville scholars have pointed out, these responses appeared primarily in a smattering of religious periodicals in New York and Boston.²⁵ Yet such responses no doubt reflected more than the reactions of a few cantankerous evangelical reviewers, since such magazines prided themselves on representing the sentiments and beliefs of members of the denominations with which they were aligned. Moreover, the same critical reactions occurred in several secular magazines such as the *American Whig Review*, which called the book's criticism of the Pacific missions "prejudiced and unfounded" (Apr. 1846, CR 35). Part of the problem for such readers was the genre issue, for if *Typee* were a novel making an argument about religious matters, it was, in effect, an advocacy novel—and a religious one at that—and, thus, doubly suspect according to the logic of informed reading.

The objections to Melville's critiques of missionaries, though not limited to the religious press, were, nonetheless, a minor note in the responses to *Typee*. In a way, this is surprising, yet the context for the public

response to what were perceived as attacks involved more than shared Christian sensibilities in the American audience. Some readers did not find Melville's treatment of the missionaries troubling because such missionary work was itself suspect for some Christians. In this period, an anti-missionary movement existed among some conservative denominations in the United States, driven by the conviction that conversion resulted from divine influence and could not be effected by human intervention. Suspicion of American Protestant missionary work in the Pacific was especially strong among Roman Catholics; thus, it is not surprising that a four-page discussion of *Typee* in an article on "Protestant Missions in the Society Islands" in the *United States Catholic Magazine* praised Melville's criticism as a welcome exposé of Protestant failures. Nor were some reviewers the only ones sympathetic to what were seen as *Typee's* excoriation of the missions. Elizabeth Elkins Sanders, a trenchant critic of South Sea missions, defended Melville's animadversions against the "scandalous and wicked transactions . . . of the missionaries in the Sandwich Islands" in her 1848 *Remarks on the "Tour Around Hawaii,"* adding that "the degradation and suffering of the natives from intercourse with civilized men, and particularly since the introduction of christian [*sic*] missionaries, cannot be denied."²⁶

Even those supportive of Pacific missionaries in some form were not necessarily troubled, since what the book actually questioned was one of the interpretive issues. Some readers took *Typee* not as a wholesale condemnation of evangelical Christianity or even of the Polynesian missions but as a legitimate corrective aimed at specific missionary errors. In the view of the *New York Morning News* (in a review reprinted a week later in the *Weekly News*), *Typee* "represents the missionary rule in the Sandwich Islands as for the most part a vulgar and miserable mismanagement. We have no respect whatsoever for a vulgar missionary . . . and we say, Show him Up by all means" (Mar. 21, 1846, *CR* 21). Similar responses appeared in the *New York Evening Mirror* and the *Newark Advertiser*, with the latter giving its "grip of approval" to Melville's "account of the character" of the natives "under the two-fold influence of sailors and missionaries" (May 10, 1847, *CR* 106). More explicitly, the *Mirror*, apparently thinking especially of chapter 26 in *Typee*, praised the way Melville candidly "treats of clerical despotism and evangelical tyranny" in the South Seas missions, particularly how "the prostitution of the natives is indirectly

made a source of revenue to the clerical establishment.” Although it “always is a thankless task to expose abuses of this kind,” continued the *Mirror* reviewer, “Mr. Melville’s remarks on the manner in which the Missionary system is conducted in Tahiti and other islands of the South Seas are deserving of serious consideration” (May 21, 1847, *CR* 110–11).

Such responses would, nonetheless, have been impossible had readers taken *Typee* as a questionable advocacy novel. What made these readings operational was that most people interpreted the book not as fiction but as a factual account tinged with poetry and romance. The *Cincinnati Morning Herald*, for instance, asserted, “The narrative is worthy of the author of Robinson Crusoe in style and in interest, with the additional advantage of being a simple record of facts” (Apr. 3, 1846, *CR* 38), while the *Boston Harbinger* said that “there is no doubt of the facts” in *Typee*, even though Melville had “embellished the facts from his own imagination,” since he sought to render “an indefinite amount of romance mingled with the reality of his narrative” (Apr. 4, 1846: 264). According to *Debow’s Review*, *Typee* has “all the attraction of elevated romance” even as “it gives truthful views of life in the far distant isles of the sea” (Nov. 1849: 465). Privately, Sophia Hawthorne expressed the same idea in a letter to her mother, in which she called *Typee* “a true history, yet how poetically told—the divine beauty of the scene, the lovely faces and forms.”²⁷ Indeed, the quality of being romanticized nonfiction, according to many readers, constituted a salient part of the charm of *Typee*, and their responses provide a further index to the book’s popularity. The *Southern Literary Messenger* called it “a new chapter in book-making. Nothing like its poetic reality had ever before issued from traveled brains” (Apr. 1851: 256). Likewise, the *Springfield Republican* claimed, “It is no small merit in the author, to have written a book so consistent in its details, and so plausible” while also having the “*colour de rose* . . . thrown round the incidents related [which] seems to reside in the author’s mind” (July 7, 1846, *CR* 80).

Taking *Typee* as nonfiction with an aura of romance did not preclude interpretive debate about what was seen as its other—and, for some, more troubling—major thematic concern: the relative merits of civilization and primitivism. Some reviewers interpreted *Typee* as an indictment tout court of civilization (which they equated to Western civilization) and an unabashed panegyric to primitivism—a view that caused them to object

to the book as a naive or misguided idealization. The *New York Morning News* offered a tempered version of this response, terming Typee a “rose colored account of a tropical race” that idealizes the islanders as if they were “performers in some rich ballet rather than as actual inhabitants of this labor stricken earth” (Mar. 18, 1846, *CR* 17). More vituperative was a review in the *Christian Parlor Magazine*, which objected to the “flagrant outrages against civilization” in *Typee* and its “palpable and absurd contradictions” regarding the supposed beatitudes of native life (July 1846, *CR* 55 and 57). The *New Haven New Englander* asserted that Melville had wandered so long among primitives that he “had forgotten . . . the advantages of civilization” and thus had succumbed to a “moral obtuseness” regarding the relative merits of savagery (July 1846, *CR* 51).

Yet again, these responses were not the only reading formulations of this thematic element in *Typee*, nor were they in the majority. Most reviewers and middle-class readers clearly found intriguing and delightful—and not at all troubling or misguided—Melville’s depiction of native life as primitively exotic. Some saw the book as containing its own counterforce to its panegyric by acknowledging the rebarbative side of the primitive. As the *United States Magazine* put it, Melville may offer “pictures . . . of earth’s loveliest vallies, rich with green flowers . . . with a warm, mellow light glowing over all,” but he also adumbrates “shadows upon the picture,” including a “dead man’s head, and the fact the author was imprisoned in this lap of luxury” (July 1849, *CR* 238). If this reviewer could make sense of the ideas and events of *Typee* through the *memento mori* of the death’s head, a reviewer in the *New York Evening Mirror* simply evoked the most ominous putative feature of the Typees as an index to Melville’s balanced and accurate representation. Asking “What are we to think of the little paradise in savagedom?” this reviewer responded, “we see either nothing impossible or improbable in it. Very far, indeed, from being purely ethereal . . . [t]he old King [Mehevi] and his retainers are strongly suggested of devouring their neighbors, and the author’s lady love . . . eats raw fish” (May 21, 1847, *CR* 108–9). More was operating here than just the “transparency” of textual evidence these readers found or even the activity of filling, in a comprehensible way, the gap they located between the paradisiacal and the horrific in Melville’s depiction of the Typees. Behind such responses lay an ethnocentrism that assumed Western civilization was superior to nonwestern existence and that any

representations or arguments to the contrary, though engaging to read as fantasies, were undoubtedly exaggerations. Through this interpretive horizon, readers found a way to come to terms with the mixture of romance and reality they attributed to *Typee*. If Melville's work was an authentic piece of nonfiction, then a means to reconcile that status with its panegyric to primitivism in a way that made the text semantically consistent was to ascribe to the text a strategy that combined a pleasant fantasy with a narrative return of the reader to reality via the mark of the cannibal.

The response to Melville's depiction of Typee culture as a charming but clearly demarcated fantasy depended, therefore, on several elements in the audience's interpretive repertoire, and one not to be overlooked, particularly for the second response, was another form of familiarity. For many readers, Melville's idyllic depiction of the primitive was neither unsettling nor problematic because they had often seen it previously in the accounts of others who had visited the Pacific islands and described them as paradises populated by noble primitives. Alluding to such well-known works as David Porter's *Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* and Stewart's *Visit to the South Seas*, the *Harbinger* pointed out, in commenting approvingly on Melville's depiction of the Marquesan islanders, "All writers unite in declaring them to be the most perfect specimens of physical beauty, symmetry, and health" (Apr. 4, 1846, CR 39). Even Melville's championing of the primitive against the depredations of western civilization, which numerous reviewers pointed to, had been a staple of such works as Stewart's, as well as Frederick W. Beechey's *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Bering Straits* (1832) and Otto von Kotzebue's *A New Voyage Round the World* (1830), all three of which readers could find cited in *Typee* as corroborating its observations.²⁸

Indeed, for many antebellum readers, the corruption and destruction of people of color by white civilization was a well-known phenomenon, as the review of *Typee* in *Graham's Magazine* reminded its audience: "It is the old story of civilization, who, whenever she goes to heathen nations, carries her eternally conflicting implements—ruin and religion" and brings in the process "disease, starvation, and death" to the natives (May 1846, CR 49). The *New York Gazette and Times* made a similar observation in discussing *Typee* but added an intriguing link that no doubt struck other middle-class readers: "As with the Indian of our

own continent, contact with the white man, has only served to entail upon the primitive, simple and happy people of the South Sea Islands, the worst vices, and to introduce diseases, from the ravages of which the race is becoming gradually but surely extinct. This is a melancholy subject of reflection, but is one nevertheless, which can neither be denied nor extenuated" (May 11, 1847, *CR* 107). Telling here is the ideological connection between Native Americans and indigenous Polynesians as part of one overarching, implacable social pattern. As John Coward has pointed out in his history of coverage of Indian removal in the popular press, from the 1830s onward, newspapers repeatedly represented Native Americans as a people who "in contact with whites quickly lost their native virtue and took up white vices" and attributed that phenomenon to a natural deficiency that marked native incapacity to resist the inevitable inroads of white civilization. In the logic of what has been called the nineteenth-century's cult of the vanishing aborigine, white progress sadly but ineluctably doomed native peoples, including the more "noble savages," to a fated displacement and extinction.²⁹ By the 1840s, as interest in the South Seas increased, that ideology was being extended to the inhabitants of the Society and Sandwich Islands. For example, an article called "The Sandwich Islands" in the *Home Journal* explained that "the rapidity with which the population of these islands is decreasing is really astonishing," but while shaking its journalistic head over such a regrettable development, the *Home Journal* added that "the grand reason, equally applicable to all Polynesians, is, *it is the destiny of the race*" to be supplanted by "a population to be supplied" by "the three great maritime powers" of Britain, France, and the United States (Sept. 15, 1849: 3). In *Typee*, accordingly, the antebellum audience could read Melville's laments about the destruction of native people in the Pacific as one more reassuring instance of the conviction that an unavoidable cost of civilization's destined, progressive advance was the contamination of natives and their inevitable "disappearance."

When taken as a whole, the antebellum reception of *Typee* suggests that Melville had produced a pre-text that had reached various interpretive communities within the larger formation of informed reading and that readers had found it engaging in various ways. That this result accorded with Melville's goals is suggested by what we know about his composition of the book and his responses to the reviews of *Typee*.

After composing the novel in 1846, he eliminated several passages that some readers might have taken as scandalous, such as his account of an erotic dance of the Lory-Lory maidens of Tamaii. Possibly at the suggestion (and perhaps the insistence) of his London publisher, he also added substantial factual material about the islanders, their folkways, and the geography of the Marquesas to contribute to the “intellectual advancement” of his audience.³⁰ Moreover, while Melville apparently was not much bothered by the few, albeit vituperative, objections to the book’s critiques of the missionaries, he agreed to the expurgation of most of the offending passages in the second edition. In a letter to his British publisher, he explained that he was “persuaded” as to the value of the changes, since “the book is certainly calculated for popular reading.” Consequently, Melville continued, “All passages which . . . offer violence to the feelings of any large class of readers are certainly objectionable.”³¹

Such changes, nonetheless, raise a question. If Melville’s desire for audience engagement included a concern about offending a “large class of readers,” why did he include the critiques of the missionaries in the first place? One factor may have been his belief that including such claims would enhance sales by fomenting a public debate that would attract middle-class readers to *Typee* out of curiosity. Additionally, Geoffrey Sanborn has speculated that the criticisms of the missionaries and of white civilization may have been “a systematic effort to draw the reader into his own paths of reflection”—particularly the middle-class audience’s preconceptions about the process of civilizing and Christianizing the Pacific Islanders.³² Such a strategy would have been in line with the protocol of informed reading that assumed self-examination was an important potential product of thoughtful reading. Of course, Melville was not naive enough to think that all—or even most—readers would so readily embrace such an opportunity; not even the most sanguine promoters of informed reading assumed such utopian results. Melville instead had to know that only a small segment of his readership might respond in that way. But that assumption itself would have entailed a recognition by Melville of multiple audiences—and multiple reader positions—for *Typee*. For if the exoticism and adventures of *Typee* were pitched to an audience interested in “popular reading,” and if the descriptive sections suited informed readers who expected to be enlightened as well as entertained, the critiques could be the stuff of interest for a group within

informed reading willing to face some tougher questions about the shape and consequences of the civilizing process.

What is interesting is not only that this segmentation by and large characterized audience responses but also that Melville's desire to include the criticisms and then to delete them indicated that he was trying to adjust his thinking about his audience and to conceptualize different segments or "classes" of his readership. But these shifts in his conceptualization also signal that by the end of 1846 Melville had not developed a clear idea of the various readerships he sensed were part of the public sphere and the middle-class audience. He was casting about in an unsystematic (though surprisingly successful) manner to find ways to write for that audience.

For the most part, Melville was quite pleased by the reception American readers gave *Typee* in terms of sales and the public discussion, as well as the responses to its follow-up, *Omoo*, which appeared in March and April 1847. But shortly after the first wave of reviews of *Omoo* had appeared, Melville commenced writing his third book, *Mardi*, by striking out in a somewhat different—and bolder—direction. Most Melville scholars agree that his artistic ambitions began to grow at this time, largely owing to his exposure to the works of Rabelais, Shakespeare, Dante, Coleridge, and Thomas Browne, which he was voraciously borrowing from the well-stocked library of Evert Duyckinck.³³ The influence of Duyckinck's library—and of Duyckinck himself, who had provided Melville with some preliminary advice on the manuscript of *Omoo*—dovetailed, however, with some of the less flattering reviews of *Omoo* that Melville had seen.

Two especially captious attacks appeared in the *New York Tribune* and the *American Whig Review*, both of which charged *Omoo* with being, as the *Tribune* put it, "positively diseased in moral tone" for what the reviewers saw as its salacious tendencies (June 26, 1847, *CR* 130).³⁴ Yet more troubling than this outburst, which was quickly countered by other reviewers who defended *Omoo* and its author, was the note first sounded by several British reviews and subsequently echoed in American magazines. What Melville and other middle-class readers had encountered in some of the British responses were comparative evaluations that found *Omoo* inferior to *Typee*. The *London Spectator* said that while *Omoo* was "equal to its predecessor" in some ways, "[t]here are not such elaborate

pictures” nor “the same novelty of subject in *Omoo* as there was in *Typee* (Apr. 10, 1847, *CR* 89). Soon after, the *London Home News* called *Typee* “the cream of the author’s experience,” while “*Omoo* [*sic*] has more the flavor of skimmed milk” (Apr. 24, 1847, *CR* 94). Finding that “this sequel to the ‘Adventures in the Marquesas’ is comparatively deficient in romance and incident,” the *London Sun* asserted, “‘*Typee*’ is pure gold to the lacquer of ‘*Omoo*’” (Apr. 26, 1847, *CR* 95–96). Several American reviewers agreed. A review in the *Washington National Intelligencer* asserted that “to create and sustain the illusion of truth . . . Mr. Melville, in our opinion, has shown himself a great adept, in *Typee*,” but “(whether from carelessness or a subject less capable of admitting invention *ad libitum*) only a considerable proficient in *Omoo*” (May 27, 1847, *CR* 73). In a similar vein, the *Knickerbocker* concluded that for attentive readers *Omoo* was an “entertaining work” that would, no doubt, be a success but “[w]ithout being equal in spirit and interest to its popular predecessor” (June 1847, *CR* 125). In the wake of the common assumption among reviewers that an author’s corpus should display “progress and development,” such remarks implied that Melville had not fulfilled the promise in *Typee* by advancing as a writer.³⁵

The conjunction of such implications and of Melville’s growing ambition was twofold. On the one hand, Melville sought to turn himself into a writer who could satisfy the expectations of more sophisticated readers—readers epitomized for Melville partly in the reviewers who had called *Omoo* inferior to *Typee* and partly in the well-read Duyckinck himself. On the other hand, Melville’s opinion of *Typee* and *Omoo* underwent an alteration in light of his readings and the book he was writing. While squarely in the middle of composing *Mardi*, he told Murray that he had developed “an invincible distaste” for his erstwhile “narrative of facts” and urged Murray “not to put me down on the title page as ‘the author of *Typee* & *Omoo*.’ I wish to separate ‘*Mardi*’ as much as possible from those two books.”³⁶

Yet in his reconceptualization Melville was neither repudiating those two texts nor renouncing everything they stood for. Nor was he turning his back on what he had sought to do with those books in his quest for a democratic authorship. On the contrary, the responses to *Omoo* and *Typee* as works of mixed genres helped Melville to think of his book-in-progress as a variform text comprehensible to multiple audiences, from

the popular readers of adventure tales to the eagle-eyed literati. It is a mistake, therefore, to think of *Mardi* primarily as Melville's "declaration of independence" from contemporary reviewers or as a novel that "leaves his reader behind" as an expression of Melville's hostility to the middle-class audience.³⁷ With *Mardi* Melville ambitiously sought to engage more, not fewer readers, by addressing an audience both popular and sophisticated.

Part of his strategy consisted of constructing *Mardi* as a work of fiction that could look like fact, as he explained in the book's preface, though this was less a reconceptualization of his craft and more an overt recognition of what some readers saw him doing in *Omoo*. But as Melville told his audience, "[t]his thought was only the germ of others, which have resulted in *Mardi*."³⁸ His overt embrace of fiction constituted a strategic move because Melville recognized that the novel was an increasingly popular genre that had an intrinsic capacity, when handled with a reasonable degree of acumen, to entertain and enlighten audiences. Additionally, readers had already seen in his previous two books the earmarks of various types of recognizable and highly regarded fictions, from the verisimilitude of *Robinson Crusoe* to the topicality and humor of *Gulliver's Travels* to the marvelous fantasies of Baron von Munchausen. *Mardi*, in Melville's growing ambition, would have all that and more, thereby satisfying with intrepid brilliance the various expectations of a range of reading groups. As he boasted to Murray, "I doubt not that—if it makes the hit I mean it to—it will be counted a rather bold aim."³⁹

Melville was not oblivious to the risks of engaging in his open-ended "voyage tither"; however, we should not attribute too much awareness on his part. He was neither closely attentive to the market nor coolly disengaged from the ambition and the heady intellectual draughts he was taking as he composed his "Romance of Polynesian Adventures." Instead, his self-confident comments to Murray, including his request for a larger-than-normal advance for his new book, suggest that he believed he could overcome the risks of writing as a bold artist because the diversity of his novel would match the variety of interests and expectations he was attributing to readers based on the various responses to *Typee* and *Omoo*. Far from being a text in which Melville was "narrowing" his projected audience, *Mardi* was to be as many things to as many readers as possible, a reading journey through Swiftian satire, Defoesque

exoticism, Rabelaisian wit, Carlylesque speculation, Danteian allegory, Brownian flights of rhetoric, and more, all fueled by Melville's imaginative wanderings and capable of transporting readers on their own literary and intellectual voyages.⁴⁰

The boldness in his letters to Murray provides an index to how badly Melville was miscalculating the situation. As a publisher of works of non-fiction, Murray had little interest in a novel, and he quickly rejected the completed manuscript of *Mardi*. Only through the efforts of a friend did Melville succeed in placing the book with the firm of Richard Bentley. Nor did Melville, as Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker point out, "give any indication of understanding how severely he might affront the goodwill of any reader" with *Mardi*.⁴¹ It was not so much, however, a matter of Melville's "misunderstanding" or "miscalculating" as it was of his not calculating much at all. Projecting an audience so vague in its multiplicity yet so simplistic in its dichotomy between adventure-seeking masses and eagle-eyed reviewers, Melville had no clear, viable sense of an implied readership for *Mardi*. As a result, he produced a pre-text virtually guaranteed to puzzle and displease as many readers as it could hope to satisfy.

Responses came first from across the Atlantic, with a few English reviewers leading the way by setting the tone, as they had for *Typee*. Unfortunately for Melville, several set it negatively, including the review in the *London Athenaeum*, which was one of the more influential British periodicals widely available to American readers. According to the *Athenaeum*, *Mardi* did not stack up well to *Typee*, particularly in regard to audience appeal: "Among the hundred people who will take it up, lured by their remembrances of 'Typee,' ninety readers will drop off at the end of the first volume; and the remaining nine will become so weary of the hero . . . that they will throw down his chronicle ere the end of its second third is reached" (Mar. 24, 1849, *CR* 193). Other British reviewers from the *Atlas*, the *Examiner*, the *Spectator*, *Britannia*, *John Bull*, and *Blackwood's* focused on problems in the novel that some American reviewers would also find: puzzling allegories, stylistic extravagances, metaphysical obscurities, and uneven writing, particularly in the second half of the book.⁴²

Mardi was not, however, a reception debacle or even the popular and critical "failure" that some modern Melvillians have termed it.⁴³ The

Harpers, who had become Melville's publishers beginning with *Omoo*, printed over three thousand copies of *Mardi* in its first edition, which was 50 percent more than Wiley had put out in the first American edition of *Typee*. Within six months more than two thousand had sold. In its first three years, *Mardi* sold an average of 215 copies per month, or nearly 70 percent of the average *Typee* had enjoyed in its initial three years.⁴⁴ Part of the difference can be attributed to price. A much larger work, *Mardi* sold for \$1.75 in its cloth edition and \$1.50 in paper—three times the retail price of *Typee* and *Omoo* and high enough to deter purchase by readers in the lower-middle-class income range. Though British sales lagged far behind what *Typee* and *Omoo* had garnered, *Mardi* matched or exceeded the figures for *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, the two novels most Melville scholars identify as his “comeback” books following *Mardi*.⁴⁵

Moreover, despite the negative grains that peppered British responses, American reviewers' comments on *Mardi* hardly justify the modern critical view that “the reception of *Mardi* is a striking example of the way in which the general readers' latent, deep-rooted hatred of the seriously experimental is flushed to the surface by a work that takes him off base.”⁴⁶ Such a characterization is another version of the canonical view of Melville as the brilliant, avant-garde artist misunderstood by the narrow and benighted antebellum audience, and it misrepresents the diversity within the public responses and overlooks reviewer attentiveness to the challenging yet engaging variety they found in *Mardi*. Quite in line with Melville's hopes of achieving a multifarious appeal matched to the novel's projected readerships, several periodicals pointed to *Mardi* as a narrative feast offering various types of reading delectables. According to the *New York Albion*, “Parts may be read by the most careless reader, and be enjoyed in the doze of a summer's afternoon—other parts require a wide-awake application or . . . one half the aroma will be lost” (Apr. 21, 1849, CR 215). The *Evening Mirror* went further in offering a catalog of both the novel's diversity and the various readers to which its elements would appeal: “Mardi [*sic*], with all its fascinations, its unique style, its beautiful language, its genial humor, its original thought, its graphic descriptions, its poetic flights, its powerful reasonings, its philosophical reflections, . . . stretches before us like a new world, and the mental eye can never weary of gazing upon its strangely beautiful landscape. Here are

points of interest for every mind. The scholar can feast upon its classic allusions, the man of erudition can add to his store, . . . the philosopher meet with things startling, the child find entertainment, and genius salute the author as the rising sun” (Apr. 13, 1849, *CR* 207). Even if we take this reviewer’s enthusiasm as a hyperbole that may signal a “puff,” the idea that *Mardi* marked Melville as a “rising sun” was not a claim unique to the *Evening Mirror*. The *Home Journal* declared, “‘Mardi’ is in a higher vein than ‘Typee’ or ‘Omoo’” owing to its being “richer in description, fuller of incident, with more humor, wit, character” (Apr. 21, 1849, *CR* 215). The *Literary World* and the *New York Morning Herald* agreed, with the former asserting, “it is evident to us that so far from any flagging from the interest of his previous works, ‘Mardi’ is, as might have been anticipated, an onward development” (Apr. 7, 1849, *CR* 206).

Besides the multidimensionality and growth these reviewers found, readers discovered in *Mardi* none of the objectionable or problematic elements of *Typee*: the critiques of the missionaries and the question of whether they were reading fiction or nonfiction. Pointing to the book’s preface, everyone agreed that *Mardi*, as *Graham’s* put it, was “an acknowledged romance” (June 1849, *CR* 235). Readers also could find in it much that looked attractively familiar. The title itself was reminiscent of the exotic-sounding titles that had come to be associated with Melville through *Typee* and *Omoo*. Then too, the plot and events, at least in the first half of the novel, met the audience’s horizon of expectations. According to the *Albany Argus*, “the first hundred pages” are in “Mr. Melville’s happiest style,” recognizable as an autobiographical (i.e., first-person) narrative of “ocean solitudes and the adventures of a whale boat” (May 17, 1849, *CR* 227).

Nor were readers necessarily wearied or stymied by the remainder of the novel, as the Athenaeum had predicted. While the characters of *Mardi* did pose interpretive problems to some readers, others engaged in an allegorical reading to make sense of the book’s personages. According to an article in the *Literary World*, Yillah “should represent ‘human happiness’ sacrificed by the priests,” while Queen Hautia is an emblem of “voluptuousness” (Aug. 11, 1849, *CR* 246). Even those who had trouble making such clear interpretive moves made sense of the novel’s characterization by reading it through a generic code and the principle of com-

pensation. Though admitting that “Babbalanja philosophizing drowsily, or the luxurious sybaritical King Media . . . are all shrouded dimly in opiate-fumes, and dream-clouds,” a review in *Putnam’s Monthly* explained that readers can “accept it as a rhapsody.” Since *Mardi* was clearly a suggestive allegorical romance, “[w]hatever they say or do; whether they . . . eat silver fruits, or make pies of emeralds and rubies . . . we feel perfectly satisfied that it is all right, because there is no claim made upon our practical belief.”⁴⁷ Indeed, according to the *Southern Quarterly Review*, the characters of *Mardi* can best be understood emblematically as part of a “fanciful voyage about the world in search of happiness” (Oct. 1849, CR 250).

Such allegorical readings represented the most common strategy that antebellum readers invoked for making sense of *Mardi*. Several reviewers pointed in particular to the voyages to Dominora, Vivenza, and Diranda from chapters 138–50 to conclude that “the continents are but isles in Mardi—Mardi is the world,” as the *Literary World* explained before going on to interpret “this isle of Dominora and its king Bello, of Vivenza, this Porphero” as “marvelously like John Bull, America, and Republican France” (Apr. 21, 1849, CR 217). In like manner, the *Albion* found in *Mardi* “some delicate satire . . . on men and things in our own and other countries,” which were discernible once readers understood that “the United State [is] plainly enough portrayed in *Vivenza*, the British Isles in *Dominora*, *Kaledoni*, and *Verdanna*, France in *Franco*, and Canada in *Kanneeda*” (Apr. 21, 1849, CR 215). A reprint of a foreign essay on Melville in the *Literary World* alerted readers that the allegory went beyond the social. Taji’s visit to Alma and Serenia needed to be understood as a spiritual allegory in which “Alma represents the Savior; Serenia his domain” (Aug. 11, 1849, CR 248).

These allegories, however, proved a source of consternation for other readers. The *Tribune* felt that the second half of *Mardi* was marred by a “vein of mystic allegory” composed of “transcendental, glittering, soap-bubble speculations” (Dec. 1, 1849, CR 288). *Saroni’s Musical Times* objected that in the course of the novel “we are taken bodily, and immersed into the fathomless sea of Allegory from which we have just emerged, gasping for breath, with monstrous Types, Myths, Symbols, and such like fantastic weeds” (Sept. 29, 1849, CR 249). Nor was this response con-

fined to some reviewers. Melville's wife, Elizabeth, expressed a similar frustration when she commented in a letter to her mother about being "deep in the 'fogs' of 'Mardi.'"48

The irony in some of these objections to *Mardi* was that the assumption that Melville was writing (exclusively or primarily) fiction, though helpful in one way, also led readers to apply codes of fiction reading in a way that led to strong criticism. Some readers found that the obscurity of *Mardi* resulted from the excessive erudition of the allegories. This complaint was in part an objection to "learned fiction," based on the belief that such writing wrongly left out or spoke over the heads of too many readers. But it was also a matter of such fiction being ostentatious and affected. For instance, the *American Whig Review* commented that in *Mardi* "[E]very page of the book undoubtedly exhibits a man of genius, . . . but exhibits also pedantry and affectation. . . . We half suspect, however, that Mr. Melville has intended this as a quiz, but at any rate he has overdone it, and made a tedious book" (Sept. 1849, *CR* 248–49). A reviewer in the *Weekly Chronotype* found *Mardi* marred by an "unconscionably pretentious style . . . and a wild license of the fancy which make his book a glittering Mosaic of obscurity and affectation" (June 9, 1849, *CR* 236). According to a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in *Mardi* "there is . . . a continual straining after effect, an effort constantly at fine writing, a sacrifice of natural ease to artificial wittiness" to the point where "every page fairly reeks of 'the smoke of the lamp'" (May 1849, *CR* 223–24). Similar remarks elsewhere pointed to a common conclusion. Overly fond of his own erudition, Melville had engaged in an excessive display of learning that caused him to intrude himself on every page of his narrative in direct violation of what informed reading insisted was a mark of good fiction writing.

Reviewers also responded negatively to elements of the novel's plot or what they felt was a lack thereof. *Holden's* found "no story to interest" but only "a dreamy kind of voluptuousness" (June 1849, *CR* 235), while the *Tribune* complained "[t]he story has not movement, no proportion, no ultimate end . . . winding its unwieldy length along, like some monster of the deep, [with] no significant point" (May 10, 1849, *CR* 226). The reviewer in *Putnam's Monthly* punned, "[w]e would just as soon undertake to give anybody a connected and coherent account of the *Mardi gras*

of Paris, on coming out of the *Bal de l'Opéra* at three in the morning” as try to recount the plot of Melville’s novel.⁴⁹

Negative responses to the text most frequently targeted what some had seen as the novel’s asset: its multifariousness. To a number of reviewers, *Mardi* seemed a farrago of literary forms, which caused it to lack a coherent generic profile. The *Richmond Watchman and Observer* felt that “the form of the book is a . . . sort of a cross between the Pilgrim’s Progress, Gulliver’s Travels, [and] Sartor Resartus” that causes it to be a “peculiar” amalgam (circa May 12, 1849, CR 226–27). The *Tribune* gave a darker tint to its observation along this line, calling *Mardi* “a monstrous compound of Carlyle, Jean-Paul, and Sterne, with now and then a touch of Ossian” (May 10, 1849, CR 225). For such readers, it was not only that *Mardi* was a curious compound of various styles, modes, and genres but also that these forms were not integrated. According to *Graham’s*, “‘Mardi’ is of the composite order of mental architecture and the various rich materials are not sufficiently harmonized to produce a unity of effect.” Owing to its ill-conceived mingling of “chapters of description, sketches of character, flashes of fanciful exaggeration, and capital audacities of satire, . . . confusion, rather than fusion, characterize the book as a whole” (June 1849, CR 236). Several reviewers agreed that in trying to do so many things, Melville had not been very successful at any of them. The *Literary World* quoted a reviewer that had found Melville to be in *Mardi* a “Rabelais without gaiety, a Cervantes without grace, a Voltaire without taste” (Aug. 4, 1849, CR 244), while a review in the *New York Eclectic Magazine* reported that if one took *Mardi* “as an allegory, the key of the casket is ‘buried in ocean deep’—if as a romance, it fails from tediousness—if as a prose poem, it is chargeable with puerility” (May 1849: 144).

Several reviewers agreed that the problem was that Melville, as the *Tribune* reviewer put it, had “failed by leaving his sphere”—the romance of reality that had characterized *Typee* and *Omoo* (May 10, 1849, CR 226). Indeed, asserted the *Boston Post*, Melville would have done “better [to] stick to his ‘fact’ which is received as ‘fiction,’ . . . than fly to ‘fiction’ which is not received at all” and which has made “‘Mardi’ . . . inferior to ‘Typee’ and ‘Omoo’” (Apr. 10, 1849, CR 212). The delightful gumbo that some found in *Mardi* struck others as an ill-concocted stew that left a

bad taste in the mouths of readers who had savored the flavors of *Typee* and *Omoo*.

Taken as a whole, therefore, the responses to *Mardi* constituted a mixed reception, but it was a troubling mix for Melville's own sense of where he stood with his audience. If *Typee* and *Omoo* had received praise and some blame, at least Melville could find in the responses what had seemed a clear mandate: He should continue giving the popular audience a good story that at once informed and enlightened, but he ought to reach out to more readers—especially more sophisticated ones—in a way that would demonstrate his growth as an author. Although Melville may have thought that he had achieved those goals with his most ambitious novel to date, readers who found *Mardi* wanting were doing so on the very grounds on which he had staked his art of fiction. The public reception of the novel also appeared to give him contradictory messages: that is, that he had successfully produced a rollicking, multifaceted novel that was also a botched collection of disparate forms, cryptic ideas, and meretricious styles, and that in turning from romances of reality to pure fiction he had engaged a variety of reader interests while improperly forefronting his own authorial presence at the expense of his audience's needs.

Melville's reaction was predictable. In a letter to Duyckinck he said that *Mardi* had been "stabbed at" by reviewers, while to Bentley he described the public discussion of the novel as having "fired quite a broadside into 'Mardi.'" Given the mixed nature of the responses to the book, Hugh Hetherington is right to say that Melville "was exaggerating the hostility of the world's reaction."⁵⁰ Yet Melville's response is not surprising in light of the hopes and effort he had poured into his third novel. It is interesting, moreover, to watch Melville in his letter to Bentley attempt to come to terms with the reception of *Mardi*. In trying to decipher what had gone wrong, Melville focuses on the relation between features of the novel and various segments of the audience; he concludes that the problem lay in segmented mismatches between the two. He opines that *Mardi*'s "having been brought out . . . in the ordinary novel format must have led to the disappointment of many readers." Then, too, he explains, "the metaphysical ingredients (for want of a better term) of the book, must of course repel some of those who read simply for amusement." Lest Bentley forget, Melville adds that "the peculiar thoughts and fancies

of a Yankee . . . could hardly be presumed to delight” British reviewers.⁵¹ Since Melville, however, had himself engaged in such a presumption and had assumed that he could write in the metaphysical mode without alienating those who read to be amused, his diagnosis is arguably less an exercise in marketplace analysis and more an expression of disguised dismay.

Although Melville was clearly projecting a good portion of his frustration at middle-class readers as much as he was feeling the “stabblings” of reviewers, it is certainly an oversimplification to claim that Melville became hostile to his readers and turned his back on them—or to claim that his frustrations with the popular readership led him to an elitist conception of audience in 1849.⁵² For one thing, turning his back on the middle-class audience was not something Melville could afford to do financially. For another, some of his other comments following the reception of *Mardi* suggest that Melville was as much dismayed with the book itself (and himself as its author) as he was with the fiction-reading public. In an April letter to Evert Duyckinck, Melville had confided that his “mood had so changed” toward *Mardi* “that I dread to look into it, & have purposely abstained from doing so since I thank God it was off my hands.” Later that year in one of his journal entries, he privately referred to himself as “H.M. author of ‘Pedee,’ ‘Hullabaloo,’ & ‘Pog-Dog.’”⁵³ That comic self-deprecation suggests a writer who sees something ridiculously inadequate in his three books with exotic-sounding titles—books that in one way or another had failed at being the multifaceted texts that could reach out to diverse readers with an authoritative and democratic embrace matching their author’s ambitions.

Even as the criticism of *Mardi* emerged, moreover, Melville felt that the objections were useful, much as he had assumed that the controversy over the missionaries had contributed to the public interest in *Typee*. He assured his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, that “[t]hese attacks [on *Mardi*] are matters of course, and are essential to the building up of my permanent reputation—if such should ever prove to be mine.” Even more significant is the next sentence of this letter to Shaw, which explains that while “dunces” may think “there’s nothing in it . . . Time, which is the solver of all riddles, will solve ‘Mardi.’” This brief assertion signals a striking new wrinkle in Melville’s thinking about audience that anticipates what Richard Brodhead has called Melville’s idea of “prophetic author-

ship” in “Hawthorne and His Mosses.”⁵⁴ The Shaw letter reveals that nearly a year before that essay, Melville was already starting to reconceptualize his audience by adding posterity to his readership and entertaining the idea that the audience of the future might well constitute his truest readers.

Perhaps Melville’s most significant response to the reception of *Mardi*, however, was his dive back into fiction writing to produce two novels within six months in 1849: *Redburn*, published in October and November, and *White-Jacket*, published in the following February and March. Although we have little if any evidence of what Melville thought about *Redburn* and its relation to his readership while composing the novel, after its completion—and before the American reviews began appearing—he disparaged the novel privately to family and friends. In a letter to Duyckinck in December, Melville described himself as “a poor devil writer with duns all around him & looking over the back of his chair . . . like the devil about St: Anthony—what can you expect of that poor devil?—What but a beggarly ‘Redburn!’” To his father-in-law, he virtually dismissed the novel as having little value to him or to readers: “For Redburn [*sic*] I expect no particular reception of any kind. It may be deemed a book of tolerable entertainment;—& may be accounted dull,” but in either case it was a mere “job” from which “no reputation that is gratifying to me” could come.⁵⁵ Yet Melville’s disparagement was more nuanced than it seems. Although he described writing *Redburn* as little more than hired manual labor, such an equation was not necessarily pejorative for Melville. Two years later he would apply a similar metaphor to writing *Moby-Dick*, referring to “my ditchers work with that book.”⁵⁶ Moreover, in his letter to his father-in-law he had admitted that, despite having “felt obliged to refrain from writing the kind of book I had wished to,” he nonetheless had “not repressed myself much” in producing *Redburn*.

What Melville meant by repressing himself is difficult to say, but certainly middle-class readers and reviewers found *Redburn* to be at once similar to Melville’s previous work but also quite different. *Redburn* was, to be sure, a nautical novel, but rather than encountering the exotic South Pacific locales of Melville’s first three books, readers found the setting of *Redburn* to be much more like that of the world they knew. That change also involved a shift in reader perceptions of generic affiliations. Instead of seeing Melville’s new novel in relation to the adventurous voyages

depicted by Defoe, Swift, and Munchausen, reviewers tended to relate *Redburn* to the true-to-life nautical narratives of Richard Henry Dana, James Fenimore Cooper, Tobias Smollett, and Captain Marryat.

The most common response to *Redburn*, in fact, consisted of reading it as a fiction most noteworthy for its verisimilitude. The *Literary World* praised its “fidelity to nature” and the “conviction of reality” in its “fresh natural composition of ocean life” (Nov. 10, 1849, *CR* 275–76), while the *Boston Post* found that “the great charm of the work seems to be its realness. It seems to be *fact* word for word” (Nov. 20, 1849, *CR* 279). Part of that verisimilitude readers found in the novel’s characterization and dialogue, as the *New York Literary American* pointed out: “The dialogues are natural: Mr. Melville is a sailor, and he talks, acts, and writes like a sailor” (Nov. 24, 1849, *CR* 284). For others, the verisimilitude inhered in incident and exposition. The *Southern Literary Messenger* asserted, “No one, we undertake to say, can find in this sailor-boy confession any incident that might not have happened—nay that has not the air of strict probability.” Not that *Redburn* was fact; rather, the illusion of reality was so strong in the book’s “descriptions of life before the mast, of the sailor boardinghouses in Liverpool, of dock service and forecandle usages” that it “sometimes remind[s] us of Smollett” (Dec. 1849, *CR* 286).

However, while virtually all reviewers were struck by the novel’s realism, a few raised a more troubling qualifier: the verisimilitude seemed to come at a price. According to the *Springfield Republican*, while *Redburn* had “more of an air of reality” than *Typee* or *Omoo*, “possibly it may be less interesting in consequence.”⁵⁷ Despite its praise for the book’s naturalness, the *Literary American* also found *Redburn* “not as fresh, striking, and imaginative, as his former productions” (284). While several reviewers deemed it an improvement over *Mardi*, others felt *Redburn* represented a dropping off from that work. *Graham’s* asserted that *Redburn* “hardly has the intellectual merit of ‘Mardi’” and “is less adventurous in style” (Jan. 1850, *CR* 290). According to *Littell’s Living Age*, though *Mardi* had been “overwrought with romance and adventure,” *Redburn* was absolutely “deficient” in those same areas to the point of being “prosy, bald, and eventless” (Aug. 1853: 483). Indeed, the most frequent response to *Redburn*, after attention to and approval of its verisimilitude, consisted of concluding that it marked a regression from Melville’s first three books. In that vein, the *Home Journal* announced that

Redburn “will not perhaps raise the author’s literary reputation from the pinnacle where *Mardi* [*sic*] placed it” (Nov. 24, 1849: 2). More often, it was the standard of *Typee* or *Omoo* of which *Redburn* was assumed to fall short. *Littell’s* believed that in its characterization “one misses the breadth and finish of his corresponding description in ‘*Omoo*’” (484), and the *Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post* explained that *Redburn* “is not equal to either ‘*Typee*’ or ‘*Omoo*’” because instead of the “glorious islands of the Pacific,” Melville has written his fourth book on “the hackneyed subject of a voyage to Liverpool” (Dec. 1, 1849: 2).

There is little record of Melville’s reaction to this or any other element of the reception of *Redburn*. Supposedly on one occasion he said he had found the reviews “laughable,” but if so, it was a darkly ironic comedy for Melville.⁵⁸ If he had “repressed” himself even a tad out of a desire to regasp a broad, popular audience, the sales of *Redburn* had to be disappointing to him. Though they totaled over 2,300 copies in the United States, they failed to match the success of either *Typee* or *Omoo* and barely outgained *Mardi’s* total.⁵⁹ Just as importantly, reviewers were telling Melville that he had drawn back too far and thus had come up short of the boldness of *Mardi* and the vigor of *Typee* and *Omoo*. Such results could only confirm Melville’s sense that in writing *Redburn* he might as well have been cutting wood or digging ditches.

There was, however, nothing Melville could do to adjust with his next novel, since *White-Jacket* was already completed and about to appear in print as the reviews for *Redburn* were running their course. Given that situation, it is little wonder that he was quick to group *White-Jacket* with *Redburn* as another mere job. Telling himself that he thought so little of the book was a way of deflecting disappointment, since it would allow him to dismiss any negative reactions as exactly what he expected. Melville had little reason, in fact, to expect that the response to *White-Jacket* would be much different from that for *Redburn*; his fifth book was another nautical novel and was even more geared to popular appeal, since its subject—or what antebellum readers identified as its major subject—was more topical: corporal punishment and abuses in the U.S. Navy.

The question of naval discipline had recently come before public attention. During the 1848–49 legislative session, the U.S. House of Representatives witnessed a long debate over a resolution to abolish flogging in the navy, and regular newspaper reports brought the issue before

the general reading public. Just as Melville was beginning *White-Jacket*, moreover, a series of articles on naval flogging had begun to appear in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*.⁶⁰ Upon publication of the novel, reviewers quickly positioned it amid the swirling tides of public discussion and debate. The novel's representation of and comments on flogging were some of the most frequently talked about and quoted passages, as reviewers interpreted Melville's new book as a work devoted first and foremost to the question of naval reform. While *Saroni's Musical Times* simply asserted that "'White-Jacket' discourses most eloquently on . . . the question of flogging in the Navy," which "is now attracting so much attention" (Mar. 30, 1850, CR 324), others specified what they saw as Melville's unmistakable position on that practice. The *Boston Evening Transcript* called *White-Jacket* a "graphic and spirited" critique of the "evil effects of the flogging and grogging system in our naval service" (Mar. 25, 1850, CR 317); the *Southern Quarterly Review* said that in the book Melville's "role is that of a reformer" in dramatizing "the cruel treatment usually bestowed upon the poor sailor" (July 1850, CR 347); and the *Biblical Repository* called the book "an exposé of the wickedness of our 'Articles of War,'" particularly of "the bad tendencies and effects of 'Flogging'" (July 1850, CR 347).

Reviewers did not just interpret *White-Jacket* as an exposé of flogging and other naval abuses; with just a few exceptions, they approved it as a welcomed protest. The *New York Albion* announced, "We entirely agree with Mr. Melville in his condemnation of many of the internal regulations of ships of war" (Mar. 30, 1850, CR 312), while the *Tribune* praised the way "Mr. Melville has performed an excellent service in revealing the secrets of his prisonhouse, and calling the public attention to the indescribable abominations of naval life, reeking with the rankest corruption of blood and cruelty" (Apr. 5, 1850, CR 329). "We are glad," asserted the *Boston Evening Transcript*, "to see that Mr. Melville, in the volume, ably exposes the evil effects of the flogging and grogging system in our naval service" (Mar. 25, 1850, CR 317).⁶¹

Such heartfelt and unqualified enthusiasm is somewhat curious. After all, everyone took *White-Jacket* as a novel, since fiction is what readers unanimously assumed Melville had been writing since *Mardi*. But if *White-Jacket* were a novel promoting a specific reform, such an interpretation meant that it belonged to the genre of advocacy fiction; thus,

according to the protocols of informed reading, reviewers should have raised doubts about it as a questionable and inferior novel. Yet few did. The question, of course, is why did reviewers so overwhelmingly support and refrain from questioning what ordinarily was a problematic type of fiction?

For a number of reviewers, the book's lifelike reality swept away misgivings. The *Methodist Quarterly Review* pointed out that while "[m]any of our readers simply from the title, will suppose this to be a mere novel," it is also "a most graphic picture of the real life of a man-of-war," which enables it to expose "the evils, abuses, and, in part, crimes of the American Naval Service" (July 1850, *CR* 349). "Unlike the . . . pretending and high wrought romances of Cooper," explained the *Springfield Republican*, *White-Jacket* "deal[s] in pictures so pure and simple" that "the work cannot fail to do much in the reform" of the "baneful effect of the 'cat' and the spirit ration upon the marines in National service" (Mar. 30, 1850, *CR* 325). Indeed, reviewers often spoke about *White-Jacket's* "remarkable air of verisimilitude," its "air of simplicity and truthfulness," its "daguerreotype-like naturalness," and its "matter-of-fact minuteness of detail." One after another they grounded in such traits the book's legitimacy as a work of reform.⁶² Through such moves, reviewers read *White-jacket* as a viable reformist text by interpreting it as a real-life romance: a combination of fiction and fact, dominated by the former yet ballasted enough by the latter to not be discredited as something merely "made up."

As much as reviewers took *White-Jacket* as a factual fiction through one interpretive move, the specific objectives that they identified as *White-Jacket's* purpose further enabled them to see it as unsullied by the kind of inappropriate polemics for which advocacy novels ordinarily were decried. Reviewers could accept unproblematically the advocacy profile of *White-Jacket* because they saw in it none of the highly contentious—and thus objectionable—controversy marking advocacy novels. Readers had already been exposed to similar indictments of naval practices in Charles Briggs's *Working a Passage*, Samuel Leech's *Thirty Years from Home*, William McNally's *Evils and Abuses in the Naval Service Exposed*, and, most importantly, Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, as well as the series of articles in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*.

In the public reports, discussions, and debates, opinion repeatedly came down against flogging and corporal punishment. So strong had public sentiment become that in the same year *White-Jacket* was published, Congress passed a new naval appropriations bill that contained an amendment abolishing flogging on U.S. military and merchant vessels. Consequently, far from initiating or even having much of an impact on naval reform, *White-Jacket* was a latecomer to a public debate already largely won by the reformers.⁶³ Since Melville's novel was articulating a public consensus, reviewers and middle-class readers were quite willing to accept it as a legitimate work of reform.

It is difficult not to believe that such a response was partly what Melville had hoped would happen or that he had written *White-Jacket*, at least in part, to exploit a topical subject from an acceptable, unthreatening position as a way to regain some of his former popularity. Happily for him, a resuscitation did occur. Not only were the reviews laudatory but of the 4,500 copies of *White-Jacket* printed by the Harpers, nearly 4,000 sold in the first month.⁶⁴ Those sales certainly were the highest Melville had experienced since *Omoo*, and the public response that viewed his latest novel as something of a reprise of his first two books (i.e., a hybrid akin to his romances of real life) signaled that most reviewers saw him making an important (re)turn. If features of *Mardi* looked to be signs that Melville was neglecting the needs of his audience, *White-Jacket* struck them as a concerted and welcome effort to come back to the audience he had engaged with his earliest books.



If the responses to *White-Jacket* indicated recovery, such an implication could not have been fully satisfying to Melville. In the prevailing paradigm for considering an author's career, a return to one's writing past, after all, marked regression—or at best stasis—and not growth. Such a conclusion hardly represented what Melville wanted to hear after his ambitious and onerous experience with *Mardi* only a year earlier. Even the relative success of *White-Jacket* had to trouble Melville, as his ideas about his art and its relation to readers continued to change in 1849. As a writer whose aspiration to secure a broader and more diverse readership had grown, a return to the kind of success he had had with *Typee* and *Omoo* was less than satisfying. The problem was compounded by the

fact that, as he expressed in his December letter to Duyckinck before the reviews of *White-Jacket* appeared, Melville doubted the viability of such an aspiration if he could not even be “frank” with his audience.

Following the public response to *White-Jacket*, Melville’s conception of authorship and audience changed further as his reading, especially in Shakespeare, stimulated his ambitions and expectations. However, his well-documented encounter with Hawthorne and the galvanic bond Melville felt with the slightly older New Englander perhaps made the greatest impact. That friendship would cause Melville to “regard Hawthorne,” as he confessed to Duyckinck, “as evincing a quality of genius, immensely loftier & more profound, too, than any other American has shown hither.”⁶⁵ As the great American genius, Hawthorne became something of model for what has been called Melville’s “imperial” notion of authorship.⁶⁶

Yet his other experiences, particularly with *Mardi*, had shown Melville that an author possesses absolute dominion over neither text nor audience. As he began to write *Moby-Dick* in early 1850, he continued to feel the constraints of the literary marketplace, especially the limitations that seemed to accompany writing for a popular audience. Whether that resulted in what Charvat called a “creative tension with [the] reading public” or in bouts of despair and dismissal or in a combination of these effects, after a year of working on *Moby-Dick* Melville had reached the point where he privately but candidly declared his frustration in an early June 1851 letter to Hawthorne. “Dollars damn me,” lamented Melville. “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.”⁶⁷

Elements of that frustration as well as of his imperial ambition and his working sense of audience were already evident a year earlier, in part in a letter to Dana and then more fully in “Hawthorne and His Mosses.” In the former Melville adds a new link to his coiled chain of ideas about audience. Responding to a letter in which Dana apparently had expressed “congenial feelings” after reading *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, Melville made the following, almost surprising admission: “did I not write those books of mine almost entirely for ‘lucre’—by the job as a woodsawyer saws wood—I almost think, I should hereafter—in the case of a sea book—get my M.S.S. neatly & legibly copied by a scrivener—send you

that one copy—& deem such a procedure the best publication.”⁶⁸ What is striking (even accounting for the playful, flattering hyperbole) is Melville’s idea that one sympathetic, understanding reader—particularly if that reader is another author—could fulfill a writer’s desire to find an audience. Voicing such an idea for the first time in this May letter, Melville in the summer of 1850 would enhance and project it in the essay in which Hawthorne would become the touchstone of Melville’s meditation on author-audience relations.

His “Hawthorne” essay, of course, is where Melville first overtly articulated the two-audience theory that had been part of his working ideas in some form since *Typee*. The essay, however, also provides a lens into his revolving, kaleidoscopic view of audience during the nearly two years devoted to the composition of *Moby-Dick*. Ellen Weinauer has noted how Melville’s essay conveys the sense that he sees himself and Hawthorne as part of a “literary fraternity, a ‘brotherhood’ whose relations are set against the competitive organization of the antebellum marketplace,” and it is, indeed, difficult to come away from the piece without feeling that Melville has a good deal of disdain for the mass market for fiction.⁶⁹ At one point he refers to the popular audience as a “mere mob” (245) and disparages a whole segment of readers as “superficial skimmer[s] of pages,” who, in confronting Hawthorne and other great writers such as Shakespeare, are “egregiously deceived” into overlooking the depth and power of their works (251). Despite such a move, Melville does not simply dismiss such readers as obtusely irrelevant to an author. Though such readers may miss the dark depths of Hawthorne, that failure need not disqualify them as legitimate members of the contemporary audience, as Melville explains: “Nor need you fix upon that blackness in him, if it suit you not. Nor, indeed, will all readers discern it for it is mostly insinuated to those who may best understand it, and account for it; it is not obtruded upon everyone alike” (245). The great writer, in fact, must take into account not only the select few but also the broad multitude, which may well be less discerning, if he hopes to “breathe the unshackled, democratic spirit” (248). Although Melville does differentiate a hierarchy among readers, he creates a convergence that he sees as essential to the work of the true American fiction writer, if he or she is to achieve a democratic patronage “for the nation’s sake” (247).

Even as Melville makes his famous two-audience distinction, fur-

thermore, he collapses it. For him, the “superficial skimmer of pages” is not simply one type of respondent distinguishable from the more astute “eagle-eyed reader” he mentions in the next sentence. Rather, these also constitute reading positions between which a reader can move. This is precisely the point Melville makes through his own experience as a reader in explaining that two of Hawthorne’s stories (one of which he identifies as “Young Goodman Brown”) “did dolefully dupe no less an eagle-eyed reader than myself.” Only after carefully reading these tales, admits Melville, did he succeed in going from a superficial misinterpretation to an understanding that “the simple little tale” about Brown “is as deep as Dante” (251). By extension, Melville implies that the same thing happens to others because Hawthorne’s text impels readers to such a recognition. “Nor can you finish it,” Melville asserts, “without addressing the author in his own words—’It is to penetrate, in my bosom, the deep mystery of sin.’” For Melville, a text such as “Young Goodman Brown” is an allegory of the reader’s experience of the tale. But more importantly, it is a trigger for audience discovery that makes eagle-eyed readers from the superficial skimmers the story is designed to engage.

While both differentiating and collapsing these two categories of audience/reading, Melville in the process identifies two other types of readers that Hawthorne and any American fiction writer must deal with. One consists of the “critics of America,” and while “several of them are asleep,” they still form part of the reading public (247). They may, in fact, be a valuable part because, as Melville explains in an ironic turn, by accusing a writer of failure, such reviewers provide that author and his audience with an index to his genius, since “[f]ailure is the true test of greatness” (248). Since Melville feels, however, that it can take some time for the audience to recognize such backhanded indices and the achievement they signal, he identifies his fourth category of readers, and it is the category he had first invoked in his letter to his father-in-law a year earlier: the audience of the future. A writer such as Hawthorne—and by extension, Melville himself—must also look to “Posterity,” since posterity is where an author’s hope for understanding and recognition may lie (253).

The “Hawthorne” essay reveals far more than Melville’s dismay with the antebellum reading public or a simple dualistic concept of audience. It can be taken as expressing the complex and deep-seated ambivalence of a man torn between, on the one hand, frustration with a contemporary

readership of superficial page skimmers and soporific reviewers and, on the other, a tenacious commitment to authorship conceived as a broad engagement capable of reaching a multifarious audience.⁷⁰ Its typologies and shifts between distinctions made and then collapsed also reflect Melville's continued and ever-increasing difficulties in trying to determine, amid his quest to chase and capture his literary whale, who his audience was and how he could successfully induce them to ship on his authorial voyage.

Nor did the grueling work on *Moby-Dick* help. On the contrary, that demanding intellectual labor soon caused Melville to question some of his 1850 assumptions about who his readers were or might be. In his June 1851 letter to Hawthorne, Melville expressed little expectation from his audience of the future. "To go down to posterity is bad enough," he wrote, "but to go down as a 'man who lived among cannibals'! When I speak of posterity . . . I have come to regard this matter of Fame as the most transparent of all vanities." His letters from the second half of 1851 also demonstrate that Hawthorne had supplanted Dana as Melville's singular ideal reader, particularly after the former had expressed (in an unpreserved letter) enthusiastic admiration for *Moby-Dick* shortly after its publication. "A sense of unspeakable serenity is in me at this moment, on account of your having understood the book," Melville warmly responded, and in their glow of "fraternal feeling," he added, "your appreciation is my glorious gratuity." Two months later, by contrast, Melville warned Sarah Morewood, a friend of the family, away from his recent novel: "Dont [*sic*] you buy it—dont [*sic*] you read it when it comes out, because it is by no means the sort of book for you. It is not a piece of fine feminine Spitalfields silk. . . . Warn all gentle fastidious people from so much as peeping into the book."⁷¹ In a significant departure from the inclusive vision of his Hawthorne essay of the previous year, Melville was now thinking about who did not belong in the audience for *Moby-Dick*.

However, just as it is an oversimplification to say Melville had turned his back on readers with *Mardi*, so too would it be inaccurate to say that, in his letters to Hawthorne and Morewood, Melville was renouncing the popular audience for fiction. His comment to Morewood about *Moby-Dick*'s not being "fine feminine silk" indicates that the "fastidious people" he thought of as peripheral to the book's readership were women—a conception that paralleled the phallogocentric assumption among reviewers

that certain novels, though widely read, were outside the proper sphere of the female audience. Melville continued to subscribe to a version of that idea as he turned to his next novel. Although in a letter to Hawthorne, Melville had said that *Pierre* would be a Kraken to his whaling leviathan, he also told Sophia Hawthorne, "I shall not again send you a bowl of salt water. The next chalice I shall commend, will be a rural bowl of milk."⁷²

Though we might be tempted to dismiss such a remark as a Melvillian irony, several factors suggest he was being neither evasive nor dismissive with such a comment. Melville appears to have respected Sophia as a reader; in the same letter in which he referred to *Pierre* as a "rural bowl of milk," he also expressed appreciation for her emblematic interpretation of the "Spirit Spout" chapter in *Moby-Dick*, which Hawthorne had conveyed in one of his letters. Additionally, in a letter to Richard Bentley less than three months later, Melville described *Pierre* as "very much more calculated for popularity than anything you have yet published of mine—being a regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, & stirring passions at work."⁷³

These factors suggest that Melville was composing *Pierre* with the idea that it would be another great book—a Kraken—like *Moby-Dick* (and *Mardi*) and, at the same time, a very popular book, and that in thinking about the popular audience he had added the category of gender to his conceptualization. It was an addition, however, that did not clarify his ideas of audience but rather contributed further turbidity by being one more element in an ever-shifting supposition. In writing *Pierre* Melville was not rejecting his contemporary readers so much as operating within a conceptual morass about author-audience relations, which prevented him—to a greater degree than had been the case with *Mardi*—from formulating a viable hypothesis that could guide his drive to write for himself and for his readers.

Those readers would continue to have a say, as Melville learned when the reviews of *Moby-Dick* began to appear while he was working on *Pierre*. Once again British reviewers had the first word chronologically, but it came with a potentially damaging twist. Only two English reviews—in the *Athenaeum* and the *Spectator*—appeared and were accessible in the United States before American periodicals took up *Moby-Dick*, and the pejorative reactions of both those periodicals helped slant

the first American reviews toward the negative. Yet the British impact was neither as large nor as deleterious as some Melville scholars have claimed.⁷⁴ Nor was the American reception of *Moby-Dick* a barrage of criticisms, as is often assumed.⁷⁵ On the contrary, it was an admixture of derogation, admiration, and thoughtful commentary.

While some American reviewers did feel that *Moby-Dick* was an odd fish (or mammal), quite a few found in it much that was fascinating and amenable within their horizon of expectations. For American readers in 1851, whaling and whales were at once an exotic and commonplace subject. Whale products—from the oil used for household illumination to the bone that served as stiffening for umbrellas and clothing—touched the lives of nearly everyone as the whaling industry grew to a \$70 million enterprise in the late 1840s. Stories about whaling were in the news, apprising readers of the power, majesty, and ostensible ferocity of whales themselves, including the ones that, according to widely circulated stories, had stove and sunk the *Essex* and the *Ann Alexander*. As the *Tribune* review of *Moby-Dick* pointed out, “Everybody has heard of the tradition which is said to prevail . . . of a ferocious monster of a whale, who is proof against all the arts of harpooning, and who occasionally amuses himself with swallowing down a boat’s crew.” Melville’s new book, continued the reviewer, is “the Epic of that veritable old leviathan” (Nov. 22, 1851, CR 383). Reviews in the *Boston Daily Bee* and the *Literary World* made similar connections, thereby directing middle-class readers to expect a stirring fictional representation of real-life events.⁷⁶

For others the familiarity reverberated in different echoes. There were, of course, the characters’ names, particularly Ishmael’s and Ahab’s, with their biblical connections, and attentive readers could recall encountering other Ishmaels in two popular novels from the 1840s: Cornelius Matthew’s *Career of Puffer Hopkins* (1842) and William Starbuck Mayo’s *Kaloolah* (1849). Two reviewers found older and more prestigious literary affiliations. *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* thought that “some of the leading personages . . . present a no less unearthly appearance than the witches of Macbeth” (Dec. 1851, CR 392), while the *National Intelligencer* found on the whole that the “delineation of character is actually Shakespearean . . . in ‘Moby-Dick’” (Dec. 16, 1851, CR 400).

More than anything else, what readers noticed in the novel as both familiar and perplexing, delightful and dismaying was the diverse generic

concoction they believed Melville had brewed. Reviewers invoked various generic labels to decipher *Moby-Dick*, and in some cases a single review summoned several at once. Both the *Tribune* and the *Intelligencer* were fairly certain it was “a prose Epic on Whaling” (*Intelligencer* 400) or a “Whaliad,” as the *Tribune* dubbed it, but the *Tribune* reviewer was less certain that a single descriptor could do, since the novel also contained “occasional touches of the subtle mysticism” that are “relieved by minute descriptions of the most homely process of the whale fishery” (Nov. 22, 1851, *CR* 383). Others could not agree on a particular genre for *Moby-Dick*. The *New York Spirit of the Times* explained, “‘Moby-Dick, or the Whale’ is a ‘many-sided’ book” mixing “sermonizing, a good deal of keen satire,” the “natural history” of whales, and “romance” (Dec. 6, 1851, *CR* 396). “It becomes quite impossible to submit” such a book, said the *Literary World*, “to distinct classification as fact, fiction, or essay. . . . Moby Dick [sic] may be pronounced a most remarkable sea-dish—an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, [and] fine writing” (Nov. 22, 1851, *CR* 384).

As might be expected, some reviewers objected to this generic gumbo as an affront to the principle that a novel should have a consistent generic footprint. Other reviewers, however, embraced that melange as interesting and highly readable. The *Springfield Republican* announced that “in this, his latest book Mr Melville has woven around this cumbersome bulk of a romance, a large and interesting web of narrative, information, and sketches of character and scenery, in a quaint though interesting style” (Nov. 17, 1851, *CR* 377). The *New Haven Palladium* asserted, “The work possess all the interest of the most exciting fiction, while, at the same time, it conveys much valuable information in regard to things pertaining to natural history, commerce, life on ship board, &c.” (Nov. 17, 1851, *CR* 377), while the *Washington Union* called *Moby-Dick* “most readable and intensely interesting” in its union of “numerous exciting incidents,” a “variety and completeness of information” about “the natural history and habits of this leviathan of the deep,” and its “life-like delineations of character” (Nov. 20, 1851, *CR* 390). Similar comments characterized responses in *Graham’s*, the *New York Independent*, and the *American Literary Gazette*, with the last of these calling the novel a work of “great versatility” in being “a fine contribution to natural history and to political economy, united to an original and powerful romance of the sea.”⁷⁷

What is surprising is that a good half of the reviewers who responded to *Moby-Dick* through genre codes found so much to approve, since such a mixture ordinarily signaled a flaw according to the tenets of informed reading—as it had been deemed in the responses to *Mardi*. But reviewers seemed more receptive to that admixture in *Moby-Dick*, and several factors may have been influential. For one thing, readers of Melville had come to associate such a congeries of forms as an “identifiable” Melvillian trait that became part of their interpretive horizon. Being thus enabled to “place” *Moby-Dick* with a certain degree of comfort, some readers could find Melville’s latest book a satisfying generic hybrid. Such a response was exemplified in the *Home Journal*, which saw in the novel’s multifaceted modes a conscious authorial strategy designed to meet “the vivid expectation excited in the reading public by his previous books” (Nov. 29, 1851, *CR* 390).

A related factor was the way readers perceived the book’s mixture of fact and fiction, romance and realism. Frequently commented upon was its chapters on cetology and whaling life, and the vast majority of American reviewers praised these sections for providing valuable information about an important American industry. Propelled by a nationalistic predisposition toward an American novel that dealt with an American subject, reviewers in the *Literary World*, *Harper’s New Monthly*, and the *Home Journal* combined such leanings with the protocol of informed reading that valued instruction and entertainment in novels to proclaim *Moby-Dick* a fiction that successfully provided both in its combination of modes. Indeed, for some, the “information” chapters on whaling and whales were precisely the needed ballast for the book’s romance of adventure and its philosophical forays. Thus, proclaimed the *Tribune*, the book’s “intensity of the plot” and “subtle mysticism” are “mixed up with so many tangible and odorous realities that we always safely alight from the excursion through mid-air upon the sober deck of the whaler” (Nov. 22, 1851, *CR* 383). Likewise, the *Troy Budget* concluded that the “great deal of information about the whale, his habits, and the manner of hunting and capturing him . . . hangs on the general thread” of the account of the *Pequod*’s quest “as an essential appurtenance, and [is] necessary to the perfection of the picture” (Nov. 14, 1851, *CR* 374). For other readers, the cetology and whaling information chapters were less a complement to the romance plot and more the center of the book; in this interpretation,

the romance tale was primarily a glue that held together and gave an engaging shape to the realistic facts. According to the *Newark Daily Advertiser*, while Melville's "object" is "to plainly portray the daily adventure and dangers of the hardy sailor in quest of the great leviathan, . . . [a] semi-marvelous narrative or tale is the link which connects the various chapters and retains the interest of the reader until the very last page" (Dec. 5, 1851, *CR* 393). The code of formal compensation played a role here. If *Moby-Dick* was a generic hybrid that ordinarily would have been problematic, it compensated by using the mixture for legitimate and productive ends. As the *To-Day* put it, while "parts of the book . . . would be of much value if their connexion with other parts of so totally different a character did not cast a shadow of uncertainty over their accuracy," the "form in which it is given, mixed with the events of the story, may perhaps attract more readers than a professed matter-of-fact history" (Jan. 10, 1852, *CR* 413).

Reviewers were less amenable to other dimensions of *Moby-Dick*, though those responses also were mixed. The *Hartford Courant* objected to the "want of unity . . . of a regular beginning and end" in the plot and overall structure, causing it to lack "the form and shape and outline of a well built [*sic*] novel" (Nov. 15, 1851, *CR* 375). While also feeling that *Moby-Dick* lacked a rounded-out and well-proportioned structure, other reviewers nonetheless relished particular sections, with the opening twenty chapters being special favorites. Although "[i]t is some time after opening . . . before we get fairly afloat," the *Literary World* admitted, "the time is very satisfactorily occupied with some strange, romantic, and withal, highly humorous adventures at New Bedford and Nantucket," which "treat the reader to a laugh worthy of Smollet" (Nov. 15, 1851, 376). *Harper's New Monthly* expressed even warmer approval of the scenes at the two whaling ports: "The introductory chapters of the volume . . . are pervaded with a fine vein of humor, and reveal a succession of portraitures, in which the lineaments of nature shine forth. . . . To many readers, these will prove the most interesting portions of the work" (Dec. 1851, *CR* 392).

Characterization received substantial attention, and it too was mixed, both in judgments about quality and in the diversity of opinions about who was the novel's protagonist. The *Literary World* believed that "an infuriated, resolute sperm whale as pursued and destroyed the Ann Alex-

ander is the hero, Moby-Dick, of Mr. Melville's book" (376), an interpretation that the *Utica Daily Gazette* seconded.⁷⁸ By contrast, the *To-Day* magazine held that the book's "hero is named Ishmael" (Jan. 10, 1852, CR 413), which was completely in line with the common interpretive assumption that an autobiographical novel inherently made its narrator the hero-protagonist, since that narrator was assumed to be a fictive avatar of the author. Such a protocol certainly obtained in reviewer interpretations of Ishmael. The *Tribune*, for example, described the opening events of *Moby-Dick* by explaining that "the writer relates his first introduction to Queequeg, a South Sea cannibal, who was his chum" (Nov. 22, 1851, CR 383); the *Albion* explained that "the writer was . . . (or says he was, which is the same thing) but a seaman aboard the vessel whose narrative he relates" (Nov. 22, 1851, CR 380); and the New Bedford *Mercury* summarized, "[a]fter some introductory chapters . . . we find our author quitting the good society of old Manhatto, 'for Cape Horn and the Pacific'" (Nov. 18, 1851, CR 378). As the *To-Day* reviewer pointed out in articulating the logic behind such an equation, because Ishmael "tells his story in the first person . . . this sort of writing . . . cannot but make the reader feel that his author has experienced what he writes about" (413). Others took a different view by interpreting Ahab as the main character. Despite identifying Ishmael with Melville, the *Tribune* reviewer asserted that "the interest of the work pivots on a certain captain Ahab" (383), while the *Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register* simply declared that the novel "abounds in episodes and marvels, of which Capt. Ahab is the great hero" (Jan. 1852, CR 410). A reviewer for the *Spirit of the Times* exemplified the logic behind such an assumption by identifying Ahab's quest as the fulcrum of *Moby-Dick*: "Think of a monomaniacal whaling captain, who, mutilated on a former voyage by a particular whale, well known for its peculiar bulk, shape, and color—seeks, at the risk of his life and the lives of his crew, to capture and slay this terror of the seas! It is on this idea that the romance hinges" (Dec. 6, 1851, CR 396).

Ahab himself represented a fascinating and troubling character for readers to decipher, both emotionally and aesthetically; consequently, reviewers evinced a variety of interpretive reactions. Several found him an aesthetically successful, strong, and original character. According to the *New York Churchman*, the "character of the monomaniac Captain Ahab is a novelty, and powerfully drawn" (Dec. 6, 1851, CR 395),

while the *Albion* concluded that “foremost” among the novel’s characters “is the Captain, in the conception of whose parts lies the most original thought of the whole book, stamping it decidedly as the production of a man of genius” (Nov. 22, 1851, *CR* 380). It is not difficult to infer in such comments a fascination that belies the modern critical assumption that “Ahab . . . was thought repulsive by most reviewers of the time.”⁷⁹ The reviewer in *Harper’s New Monthly* articulated the cause for that entrancement: “The character of Captain Ahab also opens upon us with a wonderful power. He exercises a wild bewildering fascination by his dark mysterious nature, which is not at all diminished when we obtain a clearer insight into his strange history” (Dec. 1851, *CR* 392).

Other reviewers, however, responded with some ambivalence. The *Literary World* believed that “the intense Captain Ahab is too long drawn out; some thing more of him might, we think, be left to the readers’s imagination. . . . Yet Captain Ahab is a striking conception, firmly planted on the deck of the Pequod.—a dark[,] disturbed soul arraying itself . . . for a conflict at once natural and supernatural” (Nov. 22, 1851, *CR* 385). Similarly, a reviewer in *Littell’s Living Age* said, “Captain Ahab is introduced with prodigious efforts at preparation; and there is really no lack of rude power and character about his presentment. . . . His portrait is striking.” Yet this reviewer also raised a red flag by describing Ahab’s speech as “a lingo borrowed from Rabelais, Carlyle, Emerson, [and] newspapers transcendental and transatlantic” (Aug. 1853: 486).

Indeed, those who objected to Ahab tended to find fault with the speeches Melville gave his monomaniacal captain, and some saw the problem at work in many of the characters in *Moby-Dick*. The *Southern Quarterly Review* found Melville’s “Mad Captain . . . a monstrous bore” whose “ravings . . . meant for eloquent declamation, are such as would justify a writ *de lunatico* (Jan. 1852, *CR* 412). Though having pronounced Ahab an “original” character, the *Albion* reviewer likewise objected to “the stuff and nonsense spouted forth by the crazy Captain” and felt that this “[r]arely-imagined character has been spoiled, nay altogether ruined, by a vile overdaubing with a coat of book-learning and mysticism” (Nov. 22, 1851, *CR* 382). Moreover, claimed the *Albion*, the same thing happens whenever “Mr Melville puts words into the mouths” of his characters: “From the Captain to the Cabin-boy, not a soul among them talks pure seaman’s lingo” (381). If Melville had designed his novel’s “bold and

lofty language” to strike a tragic and elevated tone, some reviewers found it an artificial posturing absurdly out of place.

Reviewers also struggled with the themes of *Moby-Dick*. Like Sophia Hawthorne, a reviewer in *Harper's New Monthly* sensed that Melville had written an emblematic novel “not without numerous . . . suggestions on psychology, ethics, and theology” and that “[b]eneath the whole story, the subtle, imaginative reader may perhaps find a pregnant allegory, intended to illustrate the mystery of life” (Dec. 1851, *CR* 391). Though sensing the same thing, other reviewers either had trouble deciphering what the philosophical allegory portended or found it unnecessary or offensive. The *Newark Daily Advertiser* felt that the novel’s “metaphysical discussion, half earnest and half banter, might well be omitted” (Dec. 5, 1851, *CR* 391), while the *Argus* objected, “There is an air of irreverence pervading” the book’s ideas (Nov. 15, 1851, *CR* 374). The *New York Churchman* also objected to *Moby-Dick*’s “wild rhapsody and bad philosophy,” as well as to its “frequent displays of irreligion and profanity” (Dec. 6, 1851, *CR* 394), and similar charges against the novel’s “profane” and “irreverent” ideas appeared in the *Boston Evening Traveller*, the *New Haven Palladium*, and *To-Day*. In making these objections, reviewers sometimes spliced together the novel’s dramatizations and themes, as the reviewer in *To-Day* did by interpreting Ishmael and Queequeg’s shared worship of the latter’s idol in chapter 10 as a scene “where sacred things are made light of” (Jan. 1852, *CR* 413).

Reviewers, of course, had made similar objections to Melville’s irreverence before, but responses to *Moby-Dick* hardly matched the shrill remonstrances against *Typee* and *Omoo* in this area. Overall, it is fair to say that the responses to *Moby-Dick* were more evenly balanced than *Mardi*’s had been and were divided along a scale similar to what *Redburn* had received. Comparatively, *Moby-Dick* was hardly condemned as a failure by antebellum reviewers.

In one sense, however, the label “failure” is not completely inaccurate; sales for *Moby-Dick* were disappointing. Although Harpers reported selling 1,535 copies in the first thirty days, only 470 more sold in the next three months, and subsequent sales averaged only 120 copies per month—about a third of *Typee*’s sales and only slightly more than half of what *Mardi* had achieved.⁸⁰ Cost again seems to have been a factor, as it had been for *Mardi*, but even the hefty retail price of \$1.50 for *Moby-*

Dick does not explain the comparatively low sales, given that *Mardi* was slightly more expensive.

An additional factor in the low sales of *Moby-Dick* was the turn in the general perception of Melville's career by early 1852. The middle-class audience could glean from the ongoing public discussion of Melville's books the strong impression that his career had been uneven and that he had never quite lived up to the success and promise of *Typee*. In fact, reviews of *Moby-Dick* in the *United State Magazine and Democratic Review* and in *To-Day* included a retrospective look at Melville's corpus and concluded that his career had taken a downward turn since *Typee*.⁸¹ To be sure, some reviewers had said that *Mardi* was actually superior to *Typee* while *Redburn* had marked a bit of a falling off. But unlike those who had defined *Mardi* as the pinnacle of his career up to that point, few if any reviewers shared Hawthorne's private opinion that *Moby-Dick* was Melville's best book.⁸²

On the contrary, besides seeing it as one more step in the downward spiral from *Typee*, some reviewers were telling the fiction-reading public that *Moby-Dick* evinced a disturbing authorial vanity in its bombastic philosophizing and affected style. The *Boston Post* said that Melville's latest novel was "stuffed with conceits and oddities of all kinds, put in artificially, deliberately and affectedly" (Nov. 20, 1851, CR 378), while the *New York Evangelist* informed its readership that "oddity is the governing character" of *Moby-Dick*, through which Melville "has reached the very limbo of eccentricity" (Nov. 20, 1851, CR 379). According to the *United States Magazine*, the novel's excesses in "bombast, in caricature, in rhetorical artifice" resulted from Melville's "attempts to display to the utmost extent his powers of 'fine writing'": "The truth is, Mr. Melville has survived his reputation. If he had been content with writing one or two books, he might have been famous, but his vanity has destroyed all chances of immortality, or even a good name with his own generation. For in truth, Mr. Melville's vanity is immeasurable. . . . He will centre all attention upon himself, or he will abandon the field of literature at once" (Jan. 1852, CR 410). In his attempts to achieve literary fame, and pumped by his previous successes, Melville had, according to this response, become so full of himself that he was intruding his presence on every page of *Moby-Dick* in violation of an important principle of in-

formed response. Even worse, in his authorial vanity, Melville had over-written *Moby-Dick* as a transparent form of self-promotion.

But whether the problem was a product of solipsism or reckless hubris, such comments implied what some were saying overtly, either in public or private: that Melville was either thoughtlessly alienating or turning his back on readers by writing primarily for himself. In the wake of the responses to *Moby-Dick*, Bentley cautioned Melville that if he “had restrained your imagination somewhat, and written in a style to be understood by the great mass of readers—nay if you had not sometimes offended the feelings of many sensitive readers[—]you would have succeeded” with this latest novel.⁸³ Publicly, the *United States Magazine* expressed the same idea more acerbically, saying that with *Moby-Dick*, “Mr Melville is evidently trying to ascertain how far the public will consent to be imposed upon” (410). Needless to say, such warnings and the picture they sketched of Melville’s corpus could hardly have done much for the sales of *Moby-Dick*, especially given its relatively high price, nor could those responses have induced among middle-class readers much enthusiasm for a writer whose career seemed to be on a downward slope.

The low sales and the damaging insinuations in some of the public discussion, which Melville himself sensed, help explain the dismay and anger with which he reacted to what was, on the whole, an otherwise balanced and at times thoughtful set of interpretations and evaluations of *Moby-Dick*. To Melville, those results seemed only to reinforce his sense that the literary marketplace was trying to force him into more ditch-digger’s work and to caricature him as a man whose fame would consist of having lived among cannibals. Especially troubling to Melville, apparently, was the fact that his friend Evert Duyckinck had been responsible for the lukewarm reviews in the *Literary World*, which among other things had called *Moby-Dick* a “conceited” book. In response, Melville wrote a curt note to Duyckinck in February 1852 canceling his subscription to the *World*.⁸⁴ Yet Melville’s ire was hardly limited to the betrayal he ascribed to Duyckinck. Most Melville scholars hold that he was so annoyed with the reception of *Moby-Dick* that in the midst of writing *Pierre* he changed its tenor by turning the last third into a withering attack on the antebellum literary marketplace, from the publishing industry and magazine reviewers to the fiction-reading public as a whole. What he

put before his audience in *Pierre*, writes Ann Douglas, was a “document of despair,” in which “Melville punishes his readers in advance for their inevitable failure of comprehension.”⁸⁵

Certainly antebellum readers could have found in *Pierre* elements that may well have been, if not punitive, at least dismaying: Pierre’s doubts about Christianity, the latently incestuous relationship between Isabel and Pierre, and the section on the literary marketplace beginning with Book 17 and entitled “Young America in Literature.” Yet there is no evidence that any readers—including any reviewers—read the last third of *Pierre* as an assault on the fiction-reading public. What that means, among other things, is that the text of *Pierre* itself cannot be taken unproblematically as an index to Melville’s view of readers and reviewers in 1853—unless, that is, we make a sweeping assumption that all antebellum readers were simply too obtuse to see what was “really” going on in Melville’s seventh novel.

To say this is not to deny the angst Melville was experiencing at this time as a writer in the marketplace for fiction. Ever since *Mardi*, he had been torn between frustration over the need to attract an audience and his desire to engage readers in the broadest and deepest ways possible. Since then, his desire and dismay had grown, increasing the tension between the two until it had reached a pinnacle during the composition of *Pierre*.

The public discussion of the novel indicates that readers felt their own kind of tension in working through their responses to *Pierre*, and one reason was that the American audience had no barometer from abroad. Contrary to what the case had been with virtually all of Melville’s previous books, British reviews did not lead the way in the reception of *Pierre*; in fact, they had no impact owing to the manner in which the novel was published. Because Melville and Bentley could not come to terms on editorial emendations to the novel, no British edition of *Pierre* was published; thus, there were no advanced copies distributed to English reviewers. The only British version of the novel, which consisted of bound copies of the remaining sets of sheets from Harper’s American printing, came out in November 1852, five months after the American edition.⁸⁶ Hence, American reviewers and readers were on their own to puzzle through the text.

And puzzle they did. In the United States, many readers took to *Pierre*;

or, *the Ambiguities* by taking it apart. Employing rules of notice, several reviewers turned to the novel's subtitle as a guide, but they found it misnamed. Instead of "Ambiguities," said the *American Whig Review*, Melville should have called his book "Absurdities" (Nov. 1852, CR 451). The *New York Lantern* had its own candidate for a more apt title: "The book is a mistake, even the name is a blunder—it should be called the *double entendre*" (Oct. 16, 1852, CR 441). For a number of reviewers the subtitle was a misnomer because it did not go far enough in reflecting the true nature of the book, since *Pierre*, according to the *Richmond Semi-Weekly Examiner*, was not just ambiguous; rather, "[t]he book is a puzzle" (Aug. 13, 1852, CR 425). A reviewer in the *New York Herald* stridently agreed: "Ambiguities, indeed! Once long brain-muddling, soul-bewildering ambiguity . . . without beginning or end—a labyrinth without a clue—an Irish bog without so much as a Jack-o-th'-lantern to guide the wanderer's footsteps" (Sept. 18, 1852, CR 437).

Such remarks used the novel's subtitle to define what quickly became the most frequent response to *Pierre*: reviewers' feelings that it was a turbid novel obscured by its own turgidity. The *Literary World* asserted that to read the novel was to enter into a "mystic romance, in which are conjured up unreal nightmare-conceptions, a confused phantasmagoria of distorted fancies and conceits" (Aug. 21, 1852, CR 431). Philadelphia's *Church's Bizarre* agreed, finding *Pierre* "wild, wayward, overstrained in thought and sentiments," problems compounded by its style, which was "barbarously outré, unnatural, and clumsy beyond measure" (Aug. 21, 1852, CR 432). The problem was not merely the difficulties the novel presented to reader understanding. Such difficulties also prevented readers from doing what one protocol of informed reading said was imperative: deciphering an author's purpose in a way that allowed a novel itself to determine in part a "specific standard" for judging "the excellence of the performance."⁸⁷

Several reviewers sought to address this uncertainty over the novel's purpose by reading *Pierre* as an elaborate joke. The reviewer in *Putnam's Monthly* explained, "When we first read *Pierre*, we felt a strong inclination to believe the whole thing to be a well-got-up hoax."⁸⁸ A reviewer in *Godey's* felt that the novel had to have been intended as a satire, but not of reviewers or fiction readers. According to *Godey's*, *Pierre* seeks "to satirize the ridiculous pretensions of some of our modern literati"—

i.e., the extravagances of authors of contemporary novels (Oct. 1852, *CR* 440).⁸⁹

A similar way of thinking may have been at work in other reviewers' attempts to decipher *Pierre* by placing it in relation to other novels and authors. The problem, however, was that for most readers such comparisons did not result in a satiric, parodic, or hoaxing profile for *Pierre* but indicated that Melville's novel was simply a bad imitation of other inept or dangerous fictions. A *Herald* review concluded that Melville "has dressed up and exhibited in Berkshire, where he is living, some of the most repulsive inventions of the George Walker and Anne Radcliffe sort" (July 29, 1852, *CR* 419), while a reviewer in the *Albion* asseverated, "'Pierre' is an objectionable tale, clumsily told" for its "heaping up horrors and trash" in "the spirit of Eugene Sue" (Aug. 21, 1852, *CR* 427-28). The connections between *Pierre* and Radcliffe's novels signaled the way several reviewers saw Melville's novel as a repugnant example of a deleterious mode: Germanic fiction. Both the *Boston Daily Times* and the *American Whig Review* explicitly made that connection, with the latter asserting that "a repulsive, unnatural and indecent plot, a style disfigured by every paltry affectation of the worst German school, and ideas perfectly unparalleled for earnest absurdity" make *Pierre* "deserving of condemnation" by "everybody who has sufficient strength of mind" (Nov. 1852, *CR* 443). Several even saw a resemblance between *Pierre* and Poe's fictions, but not through a logic of guilt by association. Rather, as the reviewer for *Graham's* saw it, Melville "has attempted seemingly to combine in [*Pierre*] the peculiarities of Poe and Hawthorne, and has succeeded in producing nothing but a powerfully unpleasant caricature of morbid thought and passions" (Oct. 1852, *CR* 441).

The *Graham's* reviewer alluded to one of the primary causes behind the antebellum response that identified and condemned *Pierre* as Germanic fiction. Repeatedly, reviewers read *Pierre* as a novel preoccupied with a morbid anatomy of the mind of its titular protagonist. The *Home Journal* called it "psychologically suggestive" yet marked by "eccentricity" and "bewildering intensity" in its probings (Sept. 4, 1852, *CR* 436). Likewise, the *Graham's* reviewer responded, "Pierre, we take it, is crazy, and the merit of the book is in clearly presenting the psychology of his madness; but the details of such a malady . . . are almost as disgusting as those of physical disease itself" (441). The *Washington National Era*

agreed even more captiously by asserting that in writing a novel purportedly about “the subtleties of psychological phenomena,” Melville produced only “characters [that] are absurdly overdrawn” and grotesque (Aug. 19, 1852, *CR* 426).

For other reviewers the Germanic inhered less in the book’s psychological characterization and more in its thematics. The *Troy Budget* found “a sort of gloomy, complaining philosophy pervading” *Pierre* (Aug. 9, 1852, *CR* 424), while the *New York Evening Mirror* warned readers that the novel’s “metaphysics are abominable,” being both “morbid and unhealthy,” and that when—or if—they completed the book, it will be “with something of the feeling . . . we experience on awakening from a horrid fit of the night-mare” (Aug. 22, 1852, *CR* 433–34). The link to the Germanic via the novel’s philosophy resulted not only from the morbidity readers found in the book’s ideas but also from their obscurity, which several reviewers found reminiscent of the Germanic, transcendental philosophy that U.S. readers associated with Thomas Carlyle. According to the *New York Herald*, “No book was ever such a compendium of Carlyle’s faults, with so few of its redeeming qualities, as *Pierre*. We have the same German English—the same transcendental flights of fancy—the . . . same incoherent ravings, and unearthly visions” (Sept. 18, 1852, *CR* 438–39).

Not that all readers found *Pierre* obscure or incoherent. A number of reviewers did attribute specific purposes, themes, or ideas to the novel, though their readings took various forms. The *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser* called *Pierre* “a regular romance of love and its dangers and difficulties” (Aug. 6, 1852, *CR* 423), while the *Lansingburg Gazette* read it as a story of “frailty and vice” (Aug. 3, 1852, *CR* 419). *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* felt that the novel “aims to present the workings of an over-sensitive spirit,” exemplified by Pierre himself.⁹⁰ Combining elements in the *Hunt’s* and the *Gazette* interpretations, a reviewer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* offered a bit more elaborate thematic reading: “The purpose of the Ambiguities . . . we should take to be the illustration of this fact—that it is quite possible for a young and fiery soul, acting strictly from a sense of duty, and being therefore in the right, to erect itself in direct hostility to all the universally received rules of moral and social order” (Sept. 1852: 574). A similar interpretation appeared in the *Literary World*, which explained, “The purpose of

Mr. Melville's story" is "to illustrate the possible antagonisms of a sense of duty . . . to all the recognized laws of social morality; and to exhibit a conflict between the virtues" (Aug. 21, 1852, *CR* 429).

While identifying such purposes, some reviewers, however, felt that these themes were precisely the problem with *Pierre*. As the reviewer of the *Literary World* put it in following up his thematic interpretation, "The most immoral *moral* of the story, if it has any moral at all, seems to be the impracticality of virtue. . . . But ordinary novel readers will never unkennel this loathsome suggestion" (430–31). Yet if the *Literary World* was certain that the fiction-reading audience would never succumb to the impiousness of *Pierre*, other reviewers raised the possibility that the novel could actually corrupt readers. Throughout the novel, according to the *Southern Literary Messenger*, "our sympathies are sought to be enlisted with Pierre," a character whose "follies and crimes . . . overcome every law of religion and morality" (575). By encouraging such empathy, Melville's novel was perverting the reader-text relationship by implying a morally dangerous role for its audience, which informed readers needed to resist. Such a response was precisely what the *Herald* practiced and called for in pointing out that in *Pierre* Melville, in a "fiend nightmare," seeks to curry reader sympathy for a protagonist who is at best a "mad-man" and even worse, "a murderer in cold blood." Indicting *Pierre* for being, in effect, a sensational novel that induces readers to take murderers to their hearts, the *Herald* declared that with a rogue like Pierre, right-thinking readers will "have no thrill of sympathy, no bowels of compassion" (437).

One interesting feature of these responses, besides being virtual textbook embodiments of principles of informed reading, is the way they integrate thematic reading, interpretation of characters, and consideration of implied reader roles. More than any other Melville novel, *Pierre* was a site not only where thematic interpretation was pronounced but where antebellum responses to characters and ideas were most tightly imbricated. Hence, reviewers who charged *Pierre* with depravity in its themes saw that problem as a product of its reprobate and monstrous characters. If "[t]hought staggers through every page like one poisoned" and if "the moral is bad," claimed a review in *Putnam's Monthly*, the reason is that the book presents a "wretched, cowardly boy for a hero" and a cast of characters in which "[e]verybody is vicious in some way or other.

The mother is vicious with pride. Isabel has a cancer of morbid, vicious, minerva-press-romance, eating into her heart. Lucy Tartan is viciously humble, and licks the dust beneath Pierre's feet."⁹¹

If Melville had hoped that *Pierre* would be a metaphysical-transcendental-psychological novel that eagle-eyed readers would savor, he soon found from reviewers' comments that he was sadly mistaken. Moreover, if *Pierre* had been calculated for popularity—perhaps as a sensational novel and/or as one that would foment enough controversy to stimulate popular curiosity and generate sales—he had miscalculated badly. Of the 2,300 copies of *Pierre* that Harpers printed, only 283 sold in the first eight months, and while the figure rose to 1,400 copies by the time the novel had been out just over a year, it would take another dozen years to sell an additional 300 copies. Just as troubling, the sharkish reviews of *Pierre* virtually devoured any chance for further sales for *Moby-Dick*.⁹²

What hurt Melville as much if not more than the poor sales were the conclusions reviewers and readers were reaching and the implications those presumptions carried. What many reviewers said implicitly, others voiced overtly: that *Pierre* was not only a significant falling off from *Typee* and *Omoo* but also his worst book so far. The *Boston Daily Times* announced that “[n]o man has more singularly abused great original power than the author of this singular work” (Aug. 5, 1852, *CR* 421). Similar sentiments were echoed in the *Boston Post*, the *New York Morning Courier*, and the *Southern Literary Messenger*, with the last of these offering the following summary of Melville's career to date: “from the time that *Typee* [*sic* for all titles] came from Mr. Melville's portfolio, he seems to have been writing under an unlucky star. The meandering manner of *Mardi* was but ill atoned for even by the capital sea-pieces of *Redburn* and *White Jacket*; *Moby Dick* proved a very tiresome affair indeed, and as for the *Ambiguities*, we are compelled to say that . . . one . . . had better leave [it] . . . unbought on the shelves of the bookseller” (Sept. 1852, *CR* 434).

Several reviewers went a step further to conclude that with his latest novel, Melville had clearly abandoned his readers or, worse yet, was deliberately abusing them. The *Morning Courier* concluded that the “wild fantastic irregularities” of *Pierre* “have no other design than to offend all correct judgment and taste” (Aug. 21, 1852, *CR* 432), while the *Literary World* decided that *Pierre* was “meant as a problem of impossible solu-

tion, to set critics and readers a wool-gathering. It is alone intelligible as an unintelligibility” (Aug. 21, 1852, CR 431). Reviewers in *Graham’s*, the *New York Evening Mirror*, and the *Southern Literary Messenger* reached similar verdicts, which in turn caused several to declare—as an *ad hominem* extension of one assumption within informed reading—that Melville, like his protagonist in *Pierre*, was going mad. According to the *New York National Magazine*, *Pierre* was “an emanation from a lunatic rather than the writing of a sober man.”⁹³ Comparable conclusions emanated from the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, *Charleston Mercury*, *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Southern Quarterly Review*, and *Boston Post*. The last of these, for example, asserted (in a review reprinted in *Littell’s Living Age*) that *Pierre* “must be supposed to emanate from a lunatic hospital” (Aug. 4, 1852, CR 420). The *New York Day Book* said it all with the scare-headline title of its brief review of the novel: “Herman Melville Crazy” (Sept. 7, 1852, CR 436).

Such charges may well have been the responses to which Melville’s wife would refer decades later when she wrote that the reception of *Pierre* “was a subject of joke to him.” Even if that were true, the other implications of the book’s reception were no laughing matter in terms of both his hopes for *Pierre* and his conception of authorship as a progressive path of growth and development.⁹⁴ Nor did they bode well for his public reputation or future sales. After all, a work of fiction by a slightly deranged author might have at least some appeal for public curiosity. Witness the response to Poe in the mid-1840s. However, readers would expect very slight rewards—whether as enjoyment, enlightenment, or even guilty pleasure—from an author who, some said, cared little if anything for his audience.



Despite the obloquy of the reception events surrounding *Pierre*, Melville was not about to turn his back on his readers, nor were readers necessarily abandoning him. *Putnam’s Monthly* in January 1853 once again referred to him by that convivial moniker of “Typee Melville,” and in midyear *Littell’s Living Age* reprinted a six-page essay that reflected his damaged yet still extant reputation and the public’s perplexed fascination with the ambiguous Melville. “Surely,” the article concluded, “the man is a Doppelgänger—a dual number incarnate (singular though he be in and out of all conscience):—surely he is two single gentlemen

rolled into one, but retaining their respective idiosyncrasies—the one sensible, sagacious, observant, . . . and producing admirable matter—the other maundering, driveling, subject to paroxysms, cramps, and . . . penning many pages of unaccountable ‘bosh.’ So that in tackling every new chapter, one is disposed to question it beforehand” (Aug. 1853: 485). But while readers were still willing to countenance Melville if he would yet smile on them, Melville was in the process of a different form of backturning—or more accurately, a turning away from the genre of fiction in which he had worked exclusively: the novel in bound format. Instead, his next published works were the short stories that he began to write in spring and summer 1853 and that started appearing in November and December in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* and the recently founded *Putnam’s Monthly*.

The genre of short fiction possessed several attractive possibilities for Melville. Writing tales would tax him far less than writing novels, which was no small relief given that vision problems were now making the physical act of writing and revising a strain for him. Additionally, the medium itself offered potential benefits. *Putnam’s*, one of the new “paying” magazines, offered him \$5 per page irrespective of sales, and Melville convinced the Harpers to compensate him at the same rate for contributions to their magazine. Consequently, he could count on specific royalties upon acceptance of a story rather than worry, as he had with his last five novels, whether sales would even cover his advances. The anonymous publication format of the two periodicals also offered him opportunities to engage readers outside the usual horizon of expectations they had for fiction from the pen of “Typee Melville” and to continue testing ways of reaching audiences without the risk of further damage to his reputation if readers found the stories wanting.⁹⁵

The turn to that medium seems to have worked for Melville, at least to some degree. Although his anonymity was not preserved, as word of his authorship for most of his stories eventually leaked out, he did make over \$1,300 for his fourteen magazine stories and for *Israel Potter*, the serialized novel that appeared in nine installments in *Putnam’s* from July 1854 to March 1855. However, the reviews and magazine notices of Melville’s stories, particularly as they appeared individually in *Harper’s* and *Putnam’s*, were few. That paucity resulted in part from the conventions of reviewing: individual short stories simply did not ordinarily constitute

occasions for reviews. But things did not fare much better for *The Piazza Tales*, his collection of five of his magazine tales plus “The Piazza,” a story written expressly for the volume. Although Dix and Edwards, which published the collection, distributed 260 copies for review, few took up the opportunity to offer comments. With forty-six reviews and notices, the *Piazza Tales* received less attention than any of Melville’s previous books. Sales were especially disappointing; of 2,500 copies printed, only 1,047 sold. Just before its publication, George Curtis, the editor of *Putnam’s Monthly*, had cautioned John Dix about the *Piazza Tales*: “I don’t think Melville’s book will sell a great deal. . . . He has lost his prestige,—& I don’t believe the Putnam stories will bring it back up.”⁹⁶ Both predictions proved correct.

Largely the same situation characterized the reception of *Israel Potter*, both in its serialized and subsequent bound formats. Although reviewers generally were pleased by *Potter*, applying to it such polite adjectives as *charming*, *delightful*, and *interesting*, they damned with faint praise, since their remarks implied what some reviewers overtly voiced: if *Israel Potter* was good, it was not that good. The *Boston Globe* felt that “Mr Melville has made an interesting book from the facts at his command—a book, not great, not remarkable for any particular in it, but . . . a readable book” (Mar. 15, 1855, CR 455). The *Christian Examiner* similarly intoned, “Its style is . . . flowing and graceful, and its tone genial and healthy; and yet the author fails to interest us very much in the fortunes of his hero. His character, in truth, lacks those elements which arrest and enchain the reader’s sympathies” (May 1855, CR 461). Finding it a pleasant but ultimately tepid novel, a reviewer in *Putnam’s Monthly* thought that *Potter* “lacks the animation that pervades those writings of Mr. Melville, which, in other respects, it resembles.”⁹⁷

With such remarks, reviewers were telling the fiction-reading public and Melville himself that he was, in effect, in a position comparable to where he had been after *Redburn*, having redeemed himself somewhat with a competent if not very striking book following a problematic novel (i.e., *Mardi*) or a disastrous one (*Pierre*). That was hardly good news to Melville. Moreover, he must have sensed that his position actually was worse than it had been seven years earlier. Fewer people were reading his work, and he was making virtually nothing from the *Piazza Tales* or from *Israel Potter*, once its *Putnam’s* run had ceased. In terms of his ca-

reer as a writer with ambitions for literary greatness and broad audience engagement, such a situation meant that the two novels into which he had poured his greatest creative energy, time, and highest hopes—*Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*—might as well never have existed for his contemporary readers.

Despite the steady decline in his status, however, Melville was not ready to admit defeat by either giving up on fiction or relinquishing his desire to reach a diverse and democratically broad audience. The evidence comes with *The Confidence-Man*, which he began after the reception of *Israel Potter* had largely run its course, and particularly in the title and subject he chose for the novel. For in the mid-1850s, the term *confidence man* possessed currency for many of Melville's readers as a topical reference to a new kind of social huckster and swindler who had appeared in several East Coast cities only a few years before. Coined in 1849 by the *New York Tribune* in reference to one William Tompson, *confidence man* was a term subsequently associated with other sharpers by the *Knickerbocker*, the *Literary World*, the *Merchant's Ledger*, the *Springfield Republican*, and other organs of the popular press. As confidence men became the subject of frequent stories and comments in newspapers and magazines by 1855, Melville no doubt was seeking to tap that broad popular interest with his newest novel.⁹⁸ Indeed, his contemporary readers made the topical connection. Evert Duyckinck commented on it in a letter to his brother shortly after the novel's publication,⁹⁹ and the *Boston Evening Transcript* specified it publicly for any reader who might have missed the link: "One of the indigenous characters who has figured long in our journals, courts, and cities, is 'the Confidence Man;' his doings form one of the staples of villainy, and an element in the romance of roguery. . . . It is not to [be] wondered at, therefore, that the subject caught the fancy of Herman Melville, an author who deals equally well in the material description and the metaphysical insight of human life" (Apr. 10, 1857, *CR* 489).

Modern Melville critics have tended to take a different view of the *Confidence-Man*. Whatever Melville's original plan may have been, they have characterized the novel as a deliberately enigmatic, fragmented, tautological, experimental, and playfully unreadable text designed (by a bitter but still highly creative author) to challenge, evade, frustrate, and egregiously deceive a contemporary readership that Melville had come

to regard as comprised almost entirely of superficial page-skimmers and unappreciative blockheads. It is, in this modern interpretation, the kind of book Melville had described in an 1849 letter to Lemuel Shaw—a book Melville had written for his own artistic satisfaction and designed to “fail” with the public.¹⁰⁰

A curious dichotomy exists between this twentieth-century critical perspective on the *Confidence-Man* and the clearly popular and topical nature of its subject. For if modern Melvillians have almost unanimously taken it as a complex, self-reflexive, private joke at the expense of an antebellum audience totally befuddled and exasperated by the text, the view of the novel by Melville’s contemporaries was both far less dire and more diverse.¹⁰¹

For one thing, reviewers quickly seized on and alerted the novel-reading audience to the idea that the *Confidence-Man* featured material that was recognizably American. Not only had the *Evening Transcript* connected the text to the well-known figure of the scam artist; the *New York Day Book* focused on its setting on the Mississippi river to style it “a clever delineation of western characteristics” (Apr. 17, 1857, CR 496). Others interpreted the novel by reading its titular character within a motif of disguise that fit audience expectations of what a con man was. Referring to the alternating appearances of the “deaf mute,” the “deformed negro,” the “Herb Doctor,” and other characters, the *New York Dispatch* explained that “the Confidence Man . . . assumes such a variety of disguises” to get “into the confidence of his fellow-passengers” (Apr. 5, 1857, CR 487–88). Other antebellum readers similarly identified such characters as avatars of the confidence man himself, thereby anticipating modern interpretations. The “confidence man and his dupes are presented under a great variety of masks,” noted the *Burlington (Vermont) Free Press* (Apr. 25, 1857, CR 500); the *Springfield Republican* deduced that “[u]nder various disguises” Melville “introduces the same character who, in some form or another, is engaged evermore in cheating” (May 16, 1857, CR 501). The latter reviewer’s remark points to the method through which readers made that identification: the principle of character consistency. For the *Republican* reviewer, that consistency resided in the common practice of the avatars, but a reviewer in *Putnam’s Monthly* identified a second tell-tale sign: Although Melville’s confidence man “comes and goes very mysteriously, and assumes many shapes, . . . he always be-

trays himself by a certain uniformity in the style of his thoughts and his machinations."¹⁰² The con man's masquerade may fool his dupes in the novel, but antebellum readers were alert to what they saw as Melville's method. Hence, the key question antebellum readers asked themselves was not the one John Bryant has termed the central issue for antebellum readers: "What *is* a confidence man?"¹⁰³ Melville's audience already knew the answer as part of the horizon of expectations they brought to the novel. Instead, readers were concerned with another question: What was Melville getting at in his representation?

What the con man's masquerade signified was a point of disagreement among reviewers, and for some a spot where uncertainty or dismay occurred. *Putnam's* called it a book whose purpose "very few [will] understand" (366), while the *Tribune* termed it a novel of "strange vagaries" (Apr. 11, 1857, CR 494)—a phrase echoed by the *New York Daily Advertiser* (May 23, 1857, CR 504). Exasperation characterized the response in the *New York Journal*, which complained that the book's "dogmatizing, theorizing, philosophising . . . are piled up for forty-five chapters in the most eccentric and incomprehensible manner" (July 1857, CR 506). A reviewer in the *Illustrated New Monthly* magazine exemplified this category of response most tellingly: "As to *The Confidence Man*, we frankly acknowledge our inability to understand it. . . . In the course of the voyage the Confidence Man assumes numerous disguises—with what object it is not clear—unless for the sake of dogmatizing, theorizing, philosophising, and amplifying upon every known subject. . . . But the object of this masquerade? None appears" (June 1857, CR 504).

Other reviewers, however, hardly agreed. Instead of shrugging their shoulders in bewilderment, they ascribed to the novel various humorous purposes. The *Burlington (Vermont) Sentinel* read it as a Rabelaisian "satire upon American character and society" (Apr. 23, 1857, CR 497), and the *Christian Inquirer* agreed, calling the novel "a rattling comic criticism upon the follies of the age" (May 2, 1857: 2). As to the specific target of the satire, some did not know, but others identified various candidates. For the *New York Dispatch* the novel was a regional exposé that sought "to show that the passengers of a Mississippi steamboat are the most gullible people in the world" (Apr. 5, 1857, CR 488). The *Berkshire County Eagle* concluded that the "money-getting spirit which appears to pervade every class of man in the States, almost like a monomania, is

vividly portrayed in this satire'” (June 19, 1857, *CR* 504). Indeed, several reviewers took the *Confidence-Man* to be a novel of moral purpose, with “the theme being the confidence or the lack of it in ordinary life,” according to the *Salem Register* (Apr. 6, 1857, *CR* 488). A reviewer in the *Boston Advertiser* saw it as a cautionary tale: “The grand *morale* of the book appears to be that the world is full of knaves and fools, and that a man who ventures to believe what is told him, necessarily belongs to the latter class” (Apr. 8, 1857, *CR* 489).

Despite some charges of obscurity, antebellum readers hardly were entirely baffled and exasperated by the *Confidence-Man*, at least in terms of reading its themes and purposes. Rather, reviewers more consistently were troubled by the novel's form and execution—problems that readers had been finding in Melville's novels ever since *Mardi*. The *North American and United States Gazette* felt that the novel's structure was “sketchy” (Apr. 4, 1857, *CR* 487), and the *Troy Budget* agreed, finding the *Confidence-Man* “not a novel” or at least not a well-constructed one, since “[i]t wants the connection, the regular plot and great part of the machinery that is found in the regular novel” (Apr. 20, 1857, *CR* 497). One of the repeated responses was that the book was haphazardly episodic to the point where, as the *Budget* put it, the “various sketches . . . might just as well have appeared anywhere else as in their immediate connection” (497). Even more frequent was the response that the novel lacked a conclusion and even circled back upon itself. The *New York Dispatch* felt that “we close this book—finding nothing concluded” (Apr. 5, 1857, *CR* 487), while the *Times* responded more strongly: “The volume has an end, but there is no conclusion to the book; the last chapter might have been the first” (Apr. 11, 1857, *CR* 494). The reviewer in the *Illustrated New Monthly* was even more chagrined by this open-ended, apparently random structure: “the book ends where it begins. You might, without sensible inconvenience, read it backwards” (June 1857, *CR* 504).

Several reviewers asserted that such abnormal handling of the aesthetics of novel writing constituted a tell-tale sign of artistic incompetence—or worse, carelessness. The *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* called the *Confidence-Man* “an indifferently digested novel” that, “[l]ike all of Melville's works,” is marked by an “artistic or mechanical execution [that] is wretched” (Apr. 11, 1857, *CR* 495). The phrase about Melville's “indif-

ferent" digestion of his materials hinted at a problem that the *New York Atlas* overtly specified: "as regards the general character of the book, we should say it was a remarkably lazy one" (Apr. 19, 1857, CR 496). Some reviewers made a connection between what they saw as the novel's formal problems and a rhetorical failure on Melville's part. If Melville was sloppy or even willfully negligent in handling the forms of fiction, he was by extension being careless about his readers and thereby was abandoning his obligations to the fiction-reading audience. By such a light, the *Confidence-Man* struck the *Springfield Republican* as a book that "seems to us like the work of one not in love or sympathy with our kind" (May 16, 1857, CR 501), while the *Newark Advertiser* believed that Melville had succeeded in producing only "the most unreadable of books" for the fiction-reading public (May 23, 1857, CR 504). Even stronger were the characterizations in the *New York Dispatch* and the *Illustrated New Monthly*. The latter said that with the *Confidence-Man*, "Mr. Melville seems to be bent on obliterating his early successes" among a readership that has the "right to expect something better" (June 1857, CR 504). The *Dispatch* was dismayed at the way Melville was now "tir[ing] out the patience of his readers" and added, "It is not right—it is trespassing too much upon the patience and forbearance of the public, when a writer possessing Herman Melville's talents, publishes such puerilities as the Confidence Man [*sic*]" (Apr. 5, 1857, CR 488).

Although the reviews of the *Confidence-Man*, when taken as a whole, were far less cutting than the knives of rebuke that had gutted *Pierre*, an important message that novel readers were getting from public discussion of the former was similar to what had come to them since at least 1852: Melville had not developed as a writer, had instead wasted his talents, and in the process had virtually turned his back on his obligations to his readers and their expectations.

Ultimately, it is unclear what impact such an impression had on the sales of the *Confidence-Man* since no record has survived for those figures in the United States, nor even for the number of copies Dix and Edwards printed. We do know, however, that only thirty-seven American reviews of the novel appeared in the antebellum press—fewer even than for the *Piazza Tales* and the lowest number generated by any of Melville's previous books. We also know that the British edition of 1,000 copies sold

fewer than 400.¹⁰⁴ Together, that information suggests that antebellum readers and reviewers had little interest in the *Confidence-Man* and that the novel earned Melville virtually nothing in income or reputation.



Melville had to be disappointed in the reception of the *Confidence-Man*. One suggestive clue to his chagrin at this time regarding the relationship between author and audience comes from a marginal notation in his copy of Chapman's translation of the *Iliad*, which Melville received and read in late 1858. In it he underscored and marked with parentheses the lines from the commentaries to book 4 that decry "all the plebeian opinions" that hold that "a man is bound to write to every vulgar reader's understanding." Regarding the craft of fiction itself, Melville's attitude is partly indicated in a letter by his brother-in-law Lemuel Shaw Jr., who reported in June 1857 that "Herman says he is not going to write any more at present & wishes to get a place in the N. Y. Custom House."¹⁰⁵ If Melville did decide in late 1857, following the disappointing reviews of the *Confidence-Man*, to give up, it was not so much by turning his back on his readers as it was by abandoning fiction writing itself.

Not that Melville stopped writing. While he never again entered the literary marketplace by publishing a novel or short story, near the end of his life he composed (and left unfinished) the manuscript of "Billy Budd." Some time in 1859, moreover, Melville turned to writing poetry. His motivation for doing so appears to have arisen from his romantic conception of poetry as a literary art that was primarily private and personal. As Melville conceived it, poetry offered an opportunity to write for himself first and to bracket any questions about the audience and the literary marketplace.¹⁰⁶

To say this is not to imply that Melville thought of his poetry as completely divorced from readers or from the possibility of finding an audience via print. But after the minimal sales of *Battle Pieces*, his collection of Civil War poems published by the Harpers in a small edition in 1866, Melville treated poetry as an intimate expression suited only for a few select readers.¹⁰⁷ *Clarel*, his epic poem of the Holy Land that was published by Putnam's in 1876 at Melville's expense, only reinforced that idea when a mere 130 copies sold before the remaining 220 in the edition were destroyed three years later to clear Putnam's inventory. One of the few reviews of the poem reached a similar conclusion, calling *Clarel* "one of

those works which the author writes for himself, and not for the reader, wherein he simply follows the beat of his own instincts and fantasies” (*New York International Review* Jan. 1877, CR 541). For anyone coming upon such a comment, the words would have seemed a final confirmation of the belief that Melville had been turning his back on readers for decades. Significantly, Melville would publish two more collections of poetry, *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon* (1891), but only in privately printed editions of twenty-five copies for presentation to friends and family.¹⁰⁸

In a very real sense, Melville got his post-Civil War wish to be a writer read only by a select few. After 1857, public discussion of his work grew less and less, narrowing to a trickle following the paltry sales and the few scattered reviews of *Battle Pieces* and *Clarel*. By the 1870s and 1880s he was being referred to in print—when he was mentioned at all—as a forgotten writer. In 1886 the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, in an article reprinted in the *New York Critic*, made a passing reference to “Herman Melville, once renowned as an author, though seldom mentioned of late.” In 1890 the syndicated columnist Edward Bok reported, “There are more people today . . . who believe Herman Melville dead than there are those who know he is living.” Added Bok, “Forty-four years ago, when his most famous tale, *Typee*, appeared, there was not a better known author than he, and he commanded his own prices. Publishers sought him, and editors considered themselves fortunate to secure his name as a literary star. And to-day? Busy New York has no idea he is even alive, and one of the best-informed literary men in this country laughed recently at my statement that Herman Melville was his neighbor by only two city blocks. ‘Nonsense,’ said he, ‘Why, Melville is dead these many years!’”¹⁰⁹ By the early 1880s a legend had developed that Melville had lapsed into silence for decades and had fallen into oblivion as a “buried” author.

The former, of course, was literally untrue, given Melville’s continued poetic output, but even the characterization of him as “buried” was only partly accurate. Something of a cult following developed in England in the 1880s among a small group of Melville admirers led by the British writer William Clark Russell, who encouraged the group’s interest, especially in *Moby-Dick*.¹¹⁰ Others were claiming that Melville was an important author who deserved more attention than the little he was getting. A letter by William Livingston Alden in the *New York Times* in 1899

asserted, “Herman Melville is far and away the most original genius that America has produced, and it is a National reproach that he should be so completely neglected.”¹¹¹ Ironically, however, such calls further underscored Melville’s greatly diminished status as a writer widely perceived as minor and little worth reading.

When Melville died in 1891, the few obituaries and posthumous comments largely extended that impression. The *North American Review* wrote that “Melville wrote out of his heart” but “[h]is books are now but little read. When he died the other day . . . men who could give you the names of fifty living poets and perhaps a hundred living American novelists owned that they had never heard of Herman Melville.” The *Springfield Republican* reported that “Herman Melville . . . has long been forgotten, and was no doubt unknown to the most of those who are reading the magazine literature and the novels of the day.” Meanwhile, the *New York Times* claimed that Melville was a “man who is so little known, even by name, to the generation now in the vigor of life that only one newspaper contained an obituary account of him, and that was but three or four lines.” Four days later, the *Times* followed up with its own brief memorial article headed, in a kind of ironic self-fulfillment, “The Late Hiram Melville.” Outside of a small group of admirers in Britain and the United States, Melville was remembered in the 1890s—if at all—as the writer of a couple of exotic and not-much-read South Sea adventure tales who, as the *New York Mail and Express* phrased it, “wrote as he felt, following out his moods and whims, confessing himself to his readers, of whose condemnation, or absolution, he took no thought.”¹¹²

It would take another three decades for the Melville revival of the 1920s to create a renewed interest in his books—an interest based on fresh interpretations of his fictions, driven largely by reading formations developed under the impact of Modernism.¹¹³ That renewal would transform Melville into the “great American novelist” of the nineteenth century and *Moby-Dick* into an icon of American fiction, but it would also perpetuate the idea that his relation with his contemporary readers consisted of saying “No” in thunder—or simply neglecting them. In his posthumous audience of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Melville once again got—and missed—what he had wished for.