The Form of American Romance
Dryden, Edgar

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Dryden, Edgar.
The Form of American Romance.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/67870

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2391801
The Entangled Text: Every book is a quotation; and 
Pierre and the 
Romance of Reading every house is a quotation out 
of all the forests and mines and 

stone quarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors.

The originals are not original. There is imitation, model, and sug-
gestion, to the very archangels, if we knew their history. The first book
tyranizes over the second. Read Tasso, and you think of Virgil; read 

Virgil, and you think of Homer; and Milton forces you to reflect how narrow are the limits of human invention. The Paradise Lost

had never existed but for these precursors.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Quotation and Originality”

I shudder at the idea of the ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyra-
mids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah ... Moses learned in all
the lore of the Egyptians. The idea of Jehovah born here.

Man seems to have had as little to do with it as Nature. It was that

supernatural creature, the priest.... And one seems to see that as out
of the crude forms of the natural earth they could evoke by art the

transcendent mass & symtry & ... of the pyramid so out of the rude elements of the insignificant thoughts that are in all men,
they could rear the transcendent conception of a God.

—Herman Melville, Journal Up the Straits
For Melville, as for Hawthorne, romance is the formal expres-
sion of a thematics of reading and writing, but Melville is free
of the Hawthornian nostalgia for a “Gentle,” “Indulgent” reader
and a “prim old author.” For him both writers and readers seek
to break free of the prescriptions of generic conventions and lit-
erary institutions. “Hawthorne and His Mosses” unambigu-
ously celebrates both writing and reading as distinguished,
productive, and unconventional activities. The narrator is
“seized” by Hawthorne’s “wild, witch voice” (HHM, 536),
“spun . . . round about in a web of dreams” by his “soft ravish-
ments” (537-38), but the “spell” (538) of his first reading response
generates a sense of Hawthorne’s “dimly-discernible greatness”
rather than a “blind, unbridled admiration” (542). And this is an
insight “mostly, insinuated to those who may best understand
it, and account for it; it is not obtruded upon every one alike”
(543). It is the “eagle-eyed reader” (549) who, on second reading,
will “[pick] up many things here and there” (548) that
deceive . . . the superficial skimmer of pages” (549) and use these
“clews” (539) to initiate a “curious and elaborate analysis” (540).

Creative reading, in short, leads to creative writing. Com-
posed during the period when Melville was hard at work on
Moby-Dick, “Hawthorne and His Mosses” implies a direct and
unambiguous link between Shakespeare and Hawthorne and re-
cords the positive effects of both writers on Melville, effects that
are clearly discernible in the novel he was about to dedicate to
Hawthorne. However, important if unacknowledged problems
exist in the essay. At the same time that Melville records the ef-
fects of Hawthorne’s spell on his imagination and celebrates
Shakespeare’s “Great Art of Telling the Truth” (542), he also
“boldly contemn[s] all imitation, though it comes to us graceful
and fragrant as the morning; and foster[s] all originality,
though, at first, it be crabbed and ugly as our own pine knots”
(546). The essay, then, raises, only to ignore, the problems of
derivation: authority and priority, tradition and the individual
talent, literary fathers and sons.

These issues become, I will argue, the enabling themes that
generate the troubling eccentricities of *Pierre*. And they continue as the central concerns of “The Piazza” (Melville’s subversive version of Hawthorne’s “familiar kind of preface”), a sketch that situates itself not only in relation to the stories it introduces but also in reference to Melville’s previously published works. A revaluation by Melville of his personal and literary past, including his ambivalent relation to Hawthorne, it offers a detailed critique of conventional romance and provides a useful entrance to the labyrinths of *Pierre*. The sketch is filled with echoes and allusions, haunting presences from Hawthorne’s prefaces—in particular the preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*—from Melville’s earlier enthusiastic review of that volume, from Shakespeare’s plays, from *The Faerie Queene*, from Tennyson’s poetry, from Melville’s own novels, from the Bible, from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. And all these blend together to disturb the clarity and meaning of the narrative voice. For almost every statement is twisted or redirected by the other voices that speak through it, with the result that the present seems troubled by a past that can only manifest itself as a disturbing ghostlike presence.

But, even in December, this northern piazza does not repel—nipping cold and gusty though it be, and the north wind, like any miller, bolting by the snow, in finest flour—for then, once more, with frosted beard, I pace the sleety deck, weathering Cape Horn.

In summer, too, Canute-like, sitting here, one is often reminded of the sea. For not only do long ground-swells roll the slanting grain, and little wavelets of the grass ripple over upon the low piazza, as their beach, and the blown down of dandelions is wafted like the spray, and the purple of the mountains is just the purple of the billows, and a still August noon broods upon the deep meadows, as a calm upon the Line; but the vastness and the lonesomeness are so oceanic, and the silence and the sameness, too, that the first peep of a strange house, rising beyond the trees, is for all the world like spying, on the Barbary coast, an unknown sail.
Herman Melville

And this recalls my inland voyage to fairy-land. A true voyage; but take it all in all, interesting as if invented. (P, 3)

This curious passage (italics mine) suggests one of the movements of the sketch. At work here is a process of recall and substitution that results in a progressive movement or turning from literal toward figurative meaning. Initiating the movement is the desire to use the memories of an adventurous past to revitalize a “time of failing faith and feeble knees” (2). But the effect of the turn is to emphasize the distance that separates that past from a wearisome present, for words here seem used in improper senses, to have wandered from their rightful places. The beginning of the passage is governed by the substitution of ship for piazza, made possible by an analogy that emerges from the phrase “sleety deck,” to bridge the gap between imagination and action. But that association is introduced by another composed of elements that are less compatible. The figure that associates the north wind with a miller is borrowed by Melville from The Winter’s Tale, where a lady’s hand is described as “soft and white as fann’d snow that’s bolted / By northern blasts twice o’er” (4.4.373-75); but he changes Shakespeare’s figure in a way that disturbs its logic and initiates a series of asymmetrical substitutions. In Melville’s rearrangement the primary meaning of the word “bolting” seems to be that of moving suddenly or quickly, and the sense of “bolting” as sifting that controls the logic of Shakespeare’s figure is present here as a secondary meaning only because of the proximity of the words “miller” and “flour.” The image suggested is that of a figure covered with snow in the same way a miller is covered by the flour he sifts, and that figure, in turn, suggests the narrator with his “frosted beard.” But this is a series of associations generated by a sort of sliding process rather than by poetic logic, and the result is to reduce the persuasive power of the figures. Hence the passage goes on to acknowledge that the seagoing past belongs exclusively to memory, and the attempt to reexperience and represent that past can only lead to disenchantment as the author’s strained
The Entangled Text

attempt to turn landscape into seascape is linked to King Canute’s effort to stop the rising tide. The reference here is probably to Thackeray’s satirical ballad on the subject in his parody of Ivanhoe, entitled Rebecca and Rowena, where the “sick and tired and weary” king surrounded by flatterers, tormented by a troubled conscience and visions of his approaching death, sinks into his “great chair” and tests the power of his divine authority by commanding the ocean to retreat. Many of the complexities surrounding the reference to Canute must await the consideration of a set of related allusions, but we can notice at this point that it contaminates the narrator’s attempt poetically to transfigure the landscape by suggesting that his effort has its source not in the memory of a lived experience but in other texts. The emphasis in the passage falls on the relations among literary works (The Winter’s Tale, Thackeray’s satire, Ivanhoe, Melville’s sketch) and on the power these entities possess to generate others that displace and represent them. This process of displacement is a major issue in the account of the inland voyage that is the subject of “The Piazza.”

As the title of the collection suggests, the piazza is a figure for the creative source or origin of the tales, and the journey recounted in the introductory sketch is a metaphor for the experience of the writer during the act of creation. In this sense it clearly follows the example of Hawthorne in the “Custom House” and “Old Manse” sketches, both of which focus on the complex motives behind the acts of writing and reading. But whereas Hawthorne’s explanation of these issues is carried out in the “transparent obscurity” of a nostalgia for a lost Spenserian world of enchantment and for an “honored reader” who, having been “ushered into [the author’s] study” (MOM, 34) graciously receives the “bouquet” of “tales and essays” which had “blossomed like flowers in the calm summer of [his] heart and mind” (35), Melville’s explanation sweeps away the “mirage haze” created by that perspective and replaces it with an atmosphere that systematically disenchant.
epigraph from *Cymbeline*, the introductory lines to a sentimental, elegiac speech:

With fairest flowers,
Whilst summer lasts and I live here, Fidele,
I'll sweeten thy sad grave: thou shalt not lack
The Flower that's like thy face, pale primrose;
The azur'd harebell, like thy veins; no, nor
The leaf of eglatine, whom not to slander,
Out-sweeten'd not thy breath: the ruddock would,
With charitable bill,—O bill sore shaming
Those rich-left heirs that let their fathers lie
Without a monument.—bring thee all this;
Yea, and furr'd moss besides, when flowers are none,
To winter-ground thy corse.

(4.2.219–28)

These lines would seem to suggest that the sketch and the tales that it introduces are, like Hawthorne's "tales and essays," which remind him of "flowers pressed between the leaves of a book" (34), reminiscences that commemorate the spirit of a place or person. However, the scene in *Cymbeline* to which Melville alludes is richly ironic, filled with delusions and misreadings. The speaker in the passage is Arvirigus, a king's son who believes himself a "rustic Mountaineer" (4.2.100) and who mistakenly mourns the death of a man who is his sister in disguise and who is drugged but not dead. Even his words are equivocated in his brother's answer:

Prithee, have done;
And do not play in wench-like words with that
Which is so serious. Let us bury him,
And not protract with admiration what
Is now due debt to the grave.

(4.2.230–33)
The relation between these two speeches suggests the movement and theme of “The Piazza,” for it points to the inauthenticity of literary language, and the sketch both invokes and subverts such a language. The artificial and conventional nature of its world is apparent in the description of the landscape as a “picture” that is in turn copied by the “sun-burnt painters painting there” (1). And the sense of the cultivated picturesque is enhanced by the narrator’s assertion that the piazza serves much as a bench in a picture gallery, “for what but picture-galleries are the marble halls of these limestone hills?—galleries hung, month after month anew, with pictures ever fading into pictures ever fresh” (2). The piazza, in short, is a structure that represents an artistic or literary point of view and suggests the sentimental possibility of a happy reciprocity between man and nature. It is a place that combines the “coziness of indoors with the freedom of outdoors,” an “easy chair” that allows a leisurely and appreciative view of nature’s “purple prospect.” Seen from the piazza land becomes landscape as the viewer seems in unison with grass, birds, flowers, and mountains. Nature here, to paraphrase Sartre, is social and literary myth, for natural objects easily become intentional ones by way of figurative language.

Whoever built the house, he builded better than he knew; or else Orion in the zenith flashed down his Damocles’ sword to him some starry night, and said, “Build there.” For how, otherwise, could it have entered the builder’s mind that, upon the clearing being made, such a purple prospect would be his?—nothing less than Greylock, with all his hills about him, like Charlemagne among his peers. (1)

The narrator’s language here suggests an authority that is at once creative and benevolent, but he then goes on to undermine that sense of an originating power by extending the dimensions of his metaphor.
Herman Melville

During the first year of my residence, the more leisurely to witness the coronation of Charlemagne (weather permitting, they crown him every sunrise and sunset), I chose me, on the hill-side bank nearby, a royal lounge of turf—a green velvet lounge, with long, moss-padded back; while at the head, strangely enough, there grew (but, I suppose, for heraldry) three tufts of blue violets in a field-argent of wild strawberries; and a trellis, with honeysuckle, I set for canopy. Very majestic lounge, indeed. So much so, that here, as with the reclining majesty of Denmark in his orchard, a sly ear-ache invaded me. But, if damps abound at times in Westminster Abbey, because it is so old, why not within this monastery of mountains, which is older?

A piazza must be had. (2)

Worth noting here is the fact that the earlier association of Greylock with Charlemagne has solidified into a mode of vision that affects the narrator's view of himself no less than his view of the surrounding landscape. For he has come to associate himself and his authorship with the authority of emperors and kings who "had the casting vote, and voted for themselves" (3). However, as the above passage goes on to suggest, the metaphor that generates the elaborate images of royalty and heraldry and suggests an idyllic relation between man and nature is not sufficient to maintain the autonomy of the figurative perspective. The allusion to Hamlet introduces an association that sharply subverts the sense of stately dignity and authority.

Sleeping within mine orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebona in a vial,
And in the porches of mine ears did pour
The lep'rous distilment; whose effect
Hold such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood; so it did mine,
And a most instant tetter bark’d about,
Most lazr-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.

(1.5.59-73)

This ghostly voice discloses others, for the orchard of the “reclining majesty of Denmark” at once invokes and contaminates Hawthorne’s description of the one at the Old Manse, where the trees possess a “domestic character” and suggest an “infinite generosity and exhaustless bounty on the part of our Mother nature” (12); as well as Melville’s interpretation of that orchard in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” as the “visible type of the fine mind that described it.” The “spell” operating in the “The Piazza” differs markedly from the one Melville earlier had found working in “The Old Manse.”

Stretched on that new mown clover, the hill-side breeze blowing over me through the wide barn door, and soothed by the hum of bees in the meadows around, how magically stole over me this Mossy Man! And how amply, how bountifully, did he redeem that delicious promise to his guests in the Old Manse, of whom it is written—“Others could give them pleasure, or amusement, or instruction—these could be picked up anywhere—but it was for me to give them rest. Rest, in a life of trouble! What better could be done for weary and world-worn spirits? What better could be done for anybody, who came within our magic circle, than to throw the spell of a magic spirit over him?” So all that day, half-buried in the new clover, I watched this Hawthorne’s “Assyrian dawn, and Paphian sunset and moonrise, from the summit of our Eastern Hill.”

(HHM, 537)

The horrible transformation described in the Hamlet passage stands in stark contrast to and undermines the idyllic language of the texts to which it is linked metaleptically. As we move
from the body of the leprous king to the guests at the Old Manse “stretched among the shadows of the orchard” (28), then to the reclining narrator of “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” and, finally, to the lounging figure in “The Piazza,” a ghostly presence moves with us, disordering stable worlds of similitudes with the intrusion of horrifying and unnatural differences. And this sense of sinister transformations is not relieved by the possibility of establishing a mediating piazza perspective, for in nineteenth-century America, “porch” and “piazza” were used interchangeably to refer to a verandah. In short the figurative use of “porch” in the Hamlet passage puts into question both the literal and figurative aspects of the piazza in the sketch and suggests a contagion spreading through language in the same way that the “lep’rous distilment” courses through the body of the king. The piazza, it appears, can offer neither the protection nor the perspective that the narrator expects, for he finds himself, like the weary and troubled Canute in his “great chair” weakened and disenchanted.

At length, when pretty well again, and sitting out, in the September morning, upon the piazza, and thinking to myself, when, just after a little flock of sheep, the farmer’s banded children passed, a-nutting, and said, “How sweet a day”—it was, after all, but what their fathers call a weather-breeder—and, indeed was become so sensitive through my illness, as that I could not bear to look upon a Chinese creeper of my adoption, and which, to my delight, climbing a post of the piazza, had burst out in starry bloom, but now, if you removed the leaves a little, showed millions of strange, cankerous worms, which, feeding upon those blossoms, so shared their blessed hue, as to make it unblessed evermore—worms, whose germs had doubtless lurked in the very bulb which, so hopefully, I had planted: in this ingrate peevishness of my weary convalescence, was I sitting there; when, suddenly looking off, I saw the golden mountain-window, dazzling like a deep-sea dolphin. Fairies there, thought I, once more; the queen of fairies at her fairy-window; at any rate, some glad mountain-
girl; it will do me good, it will cure this weariness, to look on her. No more; I'll launch my yawl—ho, cheerly, heart! and push away for fairy-land, for rainbow's end, in fairy-land.

(6-7)

Here is a world where man is not at home, where rest and peace are impossible, for nature is experienced as a feeling of threatening change and contagion brought on by the encounter with deception and difference. The phrase "weather-breeder" implies an analogy of proportion—fathers are to children as the sweet September day is to subsequent storms—but in a manner that ironizes and contaminates the linkage. And the example of the Chinese creeper subverts the possibility of a relation based on a positive acceptance of difference. As a parodic version of the adopted child whose tainted blood resists the hopes and efforts of the substitute parent, the plant undermines any idea of a cultivated decorative nature. Hence in an act of poetic defiance the narrator determines to begin an ascending movement toward another realm nearer to the sky, toward a mixed transitional landscape that is the product of the magical forces of the imagination. Promising relief from weariness is the golden glow of the "mountain window," a "fairy sign" of romance that had appeared like a Hawthornian birthmark as a "small, round, strawberry mole upon the wan cheek of northwestern hills" (5) on an autumn afternoon when the air seemed "sick" and the "sky was ominous as Hecate's cauldron." As a sign of a "haunted ring where fairies dance" that promises a cure from weariness, the glow recalls Hawthorne's description of the "Enchanted Ground" of the Old Manse that offers rest to those 'weary and world-born spirits" who come "within [the] magic circle" (MOM, 29), and it recalls, too, Melville's citation of that description in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (noted earlier).

But Melville does not recall the magic spell of Hawthornian romance and its earlier effect on him in order to celebrate unambiguously the positive effects of such enchantments, nor to suggest that the "witching conditions of light and shadow" (4) he
experiences on the piazza duplicate those of the Old Manse. Here recall takes the form of a new, more negative reading of Hawthorne's text, one that brings to the foreground details that earlier analysis had ignored. It is the dark aspect of enchantment suggested by Hawthorne's reference to the Enchanted Ground of Pilgrim's Progress but never developed in his preface that troubles the text of "The Piazza." The reference to Hecate's cauldron, for example, reminds us that she and the other witches in Macbeth "about the cauldron sing, / Like elves and fairies in a ring, / Enchanting all that you put in" (2.1.257–58), and hence suggests that enchanters have complicated, perhaps sinister, motives. And sleep, of course, does not always bring relief from weariness, as the example of Lady Macbeth makes clear; a point also suggested by the narrator's reference to A Midsummer Night's Dream, a play where fairies "following darkness like a dream" (5.1.393) "streak" the eyes of sleepers with enchanted juice and fill their minds "full of hateful fantasies" (2.1.257–58).

Quite clearly, the narrator's description of his interest in fairy land, his desire to seek out the "queen of fairies at her fairy window," is disturbed by a series of allusions suggesting some of the dismaying dangers such a pursuit involves. And these unsettling suggestions continue to accumulate as the narrator describes his search for "rainbow's end, in fairy-land." For unlike the voyages of Melville's earlier first-person narrators, the writer's journey here takes him "inland" (4), and his search is rendered from the beginning in terms of strained metaphors that call attention to their figurative or merely fanciful nature and, at the same time, nostalgically invoke real adventures of the past. The "golden mountain window" dazzles "like a deep-sea dolphin"; his "yawl" is a "high-pommeled, leather one"; the guiding stars are present in the forms of a "wigged old aries, long-visaged, and with a crumpled horn," a "milky way of white weed," and "Pleides and Hyades, of small forget-me-nots" (7). But this is a pattern that cannot be long sustained. The "yawl" is soon disenchanted (it becomes a horse) and is eventually left behind like Una's lamb.
when the narrator reaches a point where “none might go but by himself” (8). Indeed, by the time he approaches fairy-land, “footsore enough and weary” (8), the voyaging ideal persists only in improper or displaced reminders of earlier adventures. “A sultry hour, and I wore a light hat, of yellow sinnet, with white duck trowsers—both relics of my tropic sea-going. Clogged in muffling ferns, I softly stumbled, staining the knees a sea-green” (10).

Following this fall, the narrator sees “the fairy queen sitting at her fairy window,” and although she starts “like some Tahiti girl” (10) she is obviously no Fayaway. Nor does she suggest Spenser’s Gloriana. Rather she recalls the deserted and isolated figure of Tennyson’s poem “Mariana.” Like her poetic namesake, Melville’s Marianna sits alone in an isolated, dreary house and laments her weary existence. Unlike the enchanted ground of Hawthorne’s retreat, Marianna’s surroundings possess no “slumberous influence” (MOM, 39), for she is tormented by “weariness and wakefulness together” (P, 14). And the picturesque “veil of woodbine” (MOM, 33) that adds to the idyllic atmosphere of the Old Manse is here the sign of decay: “This old house is rotting. That makes it so mossy” (P, 11).

The house that from the piazza had appeared as “one spot of radiance” has its “golden sparkle” (5) disenchanted by the “strange fancies” of Marianna. Hers is a world of enigmatic shadows that lead not to essential forms but to other shadows. “The invading shadow gone the invaded one returns” (12). Indeed, for Marianna “shadows are as things,” as loving friends, for they are valued in themselves rather than as signs pointing to the things that cast them.

But the friendliest one, that used to soothe my weariness so much, coolly quivering on the ferns, it was taken from me, never to return, as Tray did just now. The shadow of a birch. The tree was struck by lightning, and brother cut it up. You saw the cross-pile out-doors—the buried root lies under it, but not the shadow. That is flown, and never will come back, nor ever anywhere stir again. (13)
This astonishing passage suggests the depth of Marianna's despair, for her lament ignores as irrelevant both the natural and human aspects of the "cross-pile of silver birch." Neither the lightning strike nor the act of cutting has significance for her. And if the "cross-pile" with the "buried root" beneath it suggests to her, as it does to the narrator, "some sequestered grave" (9), it is neither an indication of a nostalgia for the natural object nor a sign that the influences of nature can soothe us when "death is in our thoughts." Her interest is not in evidences of past life, for what was important to her was not alive. Indeed what is now poignantly missing in her world might be said itself to be simply the sign of an absence.

Marianna, however, is not completely without hope. For although all other possible cures have failed to relieve her weariness, she believes that it would leave her if she could once "look upon whoever the happy being is" (14) who lives in the gleaming house at the bottom of the mountain. Ironically it is her belief in the power of that happy house that permanently disenchants the narrator.

—Enough. Launching my yawl no more for fairy-land, I stick to the piazza. It is my box-royal; and this amphitheatre, my theatre of San Carlo. Yes, the scenery is magical—the illusion so complete. And Madam Meadow Lark, my prima donna, plays her grand engagement here; and, drinking in her sunrise note, which, Memnon-like, seems struck from the golden window, now far from me the weary face behind it.

But, every night, when the curtain falls, truth comes in with darkness. No light shows from the mountain. To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story. (14–15)

Once the narrator sees that Marianna's view of his "happy house" (14) is as poetic to her as her "fairy mountain house" (10) has been to him, he comes to understand the way the imagination seeks to relieve the weariness and boredom of life by establishing the authority of illusion. And this understanding disenchant
forever the fiction of a fairy land by exposing it as a cruel and empty pretense. Gone now is the desire for adventure that had transformed the piazza into the “sleety deck” of a ship and generated the “inland voyage to fairy land,” with the pleasant, haunted, picturesque perspective of the early paragraphs of the sketch. The piazza is no longer seen as a substitute pew, easy chair, or cozy lounge where the writer can sit, like Hawthorne, in his “familiar room” and “dream strange things and make them look like truth” (SL, 36). It has become a theatre-box, a place of deceiving appearances, of unreal falsifications. And with that change comes the return of a discredited authority. The narrator sits comfortably, even self-indulgently, in his “box-royal” enjoying the perspective of a privileged consciousness for whom both nature and other people have become merely elements in a representation. But along with this disenchanted vision comes a reversal of the traditional metaphors that makes truth analogous to light and creativity to the act of seeing. “Truth comes in with darkness,” the darkness that follows the fall of the stage curtain; and with it come ghostly presences quite unlike those that appear “without affrighting us” in Hawthorne’s “familiar room.” These are the presences that haunt the world of Pierre.

Dearest Lucy!—well, well;—twill be a pretty time we’ll have this evening; there’s the book of Flemish prints—that first we must look over; then, second, is Flaxman’s Homer—clear-cut outlines, yet full of unadorned barbaric nobleness. Then Flaxman’s Dante;—Dante! Night’s and Hell’s poet he. No, we will not open Dante. Methinks now the face—the face—minds me a little of pensive, sweet Francesca’s face—or, rather, as it had been Francesca’s daughter’s face—wafted on the sad dark wind, toward observant Virgil and the blistered Florentine. No, we will not open Flaxman’s Dante. Francesca’s mournful face is now ideal to me. Flaxman might evoke it wholly,—make it present in lines of misery—bewitching power. No! I will not open Flaxman’s Dante! Damned by the hour I read in Dante! more damned than that wherein Paolo and Francesca read in fatal Lancelot! (P, 42)
Herman Melville

Woven and entangled in this passage are most of the thematic strands of *Pierre*: the problem of reading; the questions of relatedness, of genealogical continuity and intertextuality (family structures and narrative forms); and, linking them all, the larger issues of repetition and representation. The generative energy of the passage (and the novel) is a story, the story of the face, a story that Pierre can narrate but cannot read because it exists for him in the form of a “riddle” (37) or “mournful mystery” whose meaning is “veiled” behind a “concealing screen” (41). Nevertheless, he is determined to understand it fully, to confront its meaning, as he says, “face to face” (41). But as the labyrinthine quality of the above passage suggests, the meaning of the story is difficult to decipher, and Pierre’s attempt to read it will generate a second and even more entangled and problematic narrative, that of the novel itself.

Many of the complexities must be put aside to be gathered up later, but we can notice at this point that although the face “was not of enchanted air” but had been “visibly beheld by Pierre” (43), it nevertheless exists for him in an ambiguous representational mode. The “wretched vagueness” (41) that haunts his memory stands not in the place of its “mortal lineaments” (43) but in the place of something else: in this instance Dante’s description of Francesca’s face, or, perhaps, in the place of Flaxman’s graphic representation of Dante’s description, or, more problematically, in the place of Pierre’s imaginary conception of Francesca’s daughter’s face. Pierre’s initial encounter with Isabel, then—an encounter that he is later to see as the central and authenticating one of his life—is cast in terms of signs rather than substances. It is derived not immediate. Any sense of the face as a living reality dissolves before the “long line of dependencies” (67) implied in the passage. The focus here is on purely textual entities, on questions of the relations between literary works (the chivalric tale, Dante’s poem, Melville’s novel), between graphic and linguistic signs (Flaxman’s illustrations, Dante’s poem) and on the bewitching power these entities possess to produce others that displace and represent them. In this
sense the story of the face, and by extension Pierre's own story, is necessarily written and read from the perspective of the "already written." The Paolo and Francesca episode implies that not even passion itself is natural in the sense of being an underrived and spontaneous emotion (it comes from books) and hence suggests an entangled relation between one's natural genealogy and the inherited texts of one's culture.

This problem of relatedness raised by Pierre's imaginatively creating literary parents for the mysterious face is the first one to appear in the novel which begins with a celebration of the apparent differences between the "great genealogical and real-estate dignity of some families in America" and the "winding and manufactured nobility" of the "grafted families" of the old world. Unlike the English Peerage, which is kept alive by "restorations and creations," Pierre's pedigree seems straight and unflawed. We meet the young hero "issuing from the high gabled old home" of his father and entering a world where the "very horizon [is] to him as a memorial ring," where all the "hills and swales seemed as sanctified through their long uninterrupted possession by his race." Unlike the orphaned Ishmael, he seems to find himself in a world where he truly belongs, a world where his identity, place, and destiny are confirmed by the self-reflecting environment of a "powerful and populous family." Moreover, his position as the only "surnamed Glendinning extant" and the "solitary head of his family" seems to assure him that his only "duplicate" is the "one reflected to him in the mirror." Pierre, in other words, seems to enjoy the security of a family circle within which he can define and fix himself and at the same time remain free of any challenge to his originality or authority. He can possess at once the feeling of belonging enjoyed by the son and the procreative power of the father as well, hence his dream of achieving a "monopoly of glory in capping the fame-column, whose tall shaft had been erected by his noble sires."
notion that institutions and language possess the characteristics of the biological structure of generation. But families are not trees even though they may seem to “stand as the oak” (9) for they do not originate and develop in the same way. The permanence, stability, and order implied by a genealogical chart or by the metaphor of the family tree conceals a host of discontinuities, disjunctions, entanglements, and desires that mark human relationships. The seemingly unentangled lines of the Glendinning genealogy are actually twisted and interwoven by the young heir's problematic relation to his family. Pierre's relation to his mother, for example, equivocates the orderly process whereby the father and mother produce a son who marries and continues the line: “In the playfulness of their unclouded love, and with that strange license which a perfect confidence and mutual understanding at all points, had long bred between them, they were wont to call each other brother and sister” (5). The entangling and confusing of relationships implied by this behavior is further complicated by their domestic practice that anticipates the “sweet dreams of those religious enthusiasts, who paint to us a Paradise to come, where etherealized from the drosses and stains, the holiest passion of man shall unite all kindreds and climes in one circle of pure and unimpairable delight” (16). Pierre's relation to his mother, in short, is an only partially disguised expression of a set of inhibited desires generated by a genealogical system that condemns the son to a derived and secondary existence. These desires, partially displaced here by the religious language in which they are manifested, are more concretely expressed in Pierre's “strange yearning . . . for a sister” as well as by the narrator's smug observation, “He who is sisterless, is as a bachelor before his time. For much that goes to make up the deliciousness of a wife, already lies in the sister” (7). This barely concealed expression of brother-sister incestuous desire, like the more deeply displaced mother-son relationship, suggests the extent to which Pierre unconsciously resists the defining authority of the father as well as the sense that he is no more than his father “transformed into youth once again”
Both his relation to his mother and his longing for a sister constitute a challenge to the parental role by subtly entangling the genealogical line and disrupting its temporal development. The "striking personal resemblance" between Pierre and his mother—she sees "her own graces strangely translated into the opposite sex"—makes it seem as if the mother has "long stood still in her beauty, heedless of the passing years" and Pierre seems to "meet her half-way," to have "almost advanced himself to that mature stand-point in Time, where his pedestaled mother so long had stood" (5).

But it is Pierre's response to the phantom face that is haunting and enchanting him with its suggestions of dark foreignness that is the most obvious expression of his desire to free himself from a family prison. Its magnetic quality derives in part from the fact that it is at once "wholly unknown to him" (49) and yet somehow familiar, thus making him aware of a "certain condition of his being, which was most painful, and every way uncongenial to his natural, wonted self" (53). The nature and speed of Pierre's response to Isabel's disruptive note, of course, makes explicit the status of these hidden desires. In Pierre's mind the note completely undermines the dignity and authority of the father and forces him to abandon all the "hereditary beliefs" (87) he has been unconsciously resisting all along. "I will have no more father" (87), he says, as he rejects all "earthly kith and kin" and orphan-like "stagger[s] back upon himself and find[s] support in himself" (89). "Henceforth, cast-out Pierre hath no paternity, and no past... twice-disinherited Pierre stands... free to do his own self-will and present fancy to whatever end" (199). Because he feels himself "divinely dedicated," he decides that he can abandon all "common conventional regardings," including his "hereditary duty to his mother" and his "pledged worldly faith and honor to the hand and seal of his affiancement" (106). Personal faith will replace hereditary beliefs, and the result will be a more orderly as well as more authentic life, for the genealogical tradition that seems to promise continuity and unity is actually intertwined in the "infinite entanglements of all social
things” (191). From the “long line of dependencies” that constitute it come the “thousand proprieties and polished finenesses” (83) that characterize the social. Like Christ, Pierre believes that he can free himself from these “myriad alliances and crisscrossings” (191) and disentangle himself from “all fleshly alliances” (164) by substituting for the genealogical imperative a new and celebate enterprise.

Not that at present all these things did thus present themselves to Pierre; but these things were foetally forming in him. Impregnations from high enthusiasms he had received; and the now incipient offspring which so stirred, with such painful, vague vibrations in his soul; this, in its mature development, when it should at last come forth in living deeds, would scorn all personal relationship with Pierre, and hold his heart’s dearest interests for naught.

Thus, in the Enthusiast to Duty, the heaven-begotten Christ is born; and will not own a mortal parent, and spurns and rends all mortal bonds. (106)

In the place of inherited values and relations Pierre places an orphaned, self-begotten identity and that in turn generates a miraculous conception. In effect a spiritual genealogy supplants the physical one, apparently making possible a new family structure. For both Isabel and Lucy, Pierre seems capable of fulfilling all the traditional familial roles. “I want none in the world but thee” (312), Isabel tells him, and Lucy insists that he is “my mother and my brothers, and all the world, and all heaven, and all the universe to me—thou art my Pierre” (311). Moreover, the new relationships, as Pierre sees them, are free from the ambiguities of the more traditional ones: he and Isabel are “wide brother and sister in common humanity” (273) and he and Lucy spiritual cousins with “no declaration; no bridal” (310) who “love as angels do” (309).

Pierre, then, seems to have made himself his “own Alpha and Omega,” to have reached a point where he can “feel himself in himself and not by reflection in others” (261). Moreover, having
freed himself from the defining relationships of the patriarchal tradition he has also made himself independent of its economic imperatives. When he abandons his “fine social position” and “noble patrimony” he boldly asserts that he will “live on himself”; that is to say that he will become an author and support himself by putting his “soul to labor . . . and pay his body her wages” (261). In the place of fathering a natural son who will be his unwilling copy even as he was his father’s, he will give the world a book, “a child born solely from one parent” (259), that through its radical originality will “gospelize the world anew” (273).

Pierre assumes that as an author he will wield an authority that is not subject to the confining and restricting definitions from the past. However, behind the differences that seem to separate the act of authoring from that of physical engenderment is a notion common to both, that what one makes is one’s offspring, legacy, and representative. This element of sameness puts into question Pierre’s claims of absolute authority and originality. As the Paolo-Francesca passage implies, the process of representation involves questions of inherited tendencies as well as originating intentions. These issues appear in their most obvious form in the novel’s focus on painted images of the father, an especially likely association, for as Paul de Man has shown, it is in painting (and especially in eighteenth-century theories of painting) that the process of representation appears in its most unambiguous aspects. Conceived of as imitation, painting (as de Man points out) has the effect of seeming to restore the represented object to view as if it were present, miraculously bringing back into existence a presence that existed in another time and in another place. This duplication of the objects of perception, however, does not exhaust the power of the painted image. Even more impressive is its apparent ability to transform inward and ideal experiences into objects of perception and, by making them visible, confer upon them the ontological stability of objective existence. The military portrait of Pierre’s grandfather, for example, at once captures the image of the original so com-
pletely that Pierre feels “a mournful longing to meet his living aspect in real life” and possesses the “heavenly persuasiveness of angelic speech; a glorious gospel framed and hung upon the wall, and declaring to all people, as from the Mount, that man is a noble, god-like being, full of choicest juices; made up of strength and beauty” (30) This description, of course, equivocates Pierre’s decision to “gospelize the world anew” by associating it with a related and prior originating act, but it also undermines the assumption that imitation duplicates presence. The “mournful longing” that the painting generates in Pierre is a reminder of one problematic aspect of representation since it points to the absence of the represented entity, and the disquieting effects of that absence are strengthened by the irony implicit in the fact that a military portrait seems to the young man to be a concrete expression of the ideals of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.

The painted image of the old Pierre Glendinning points to an absence rather than a presence, to “once living but now impossible ancestries in the past” (32) and raises the problem of genealogy as representation by illustrating what the narrator calls the “endless descendedness of names” (9). Not only is Pierre his father’s “namesake” (73) but his grandfather’s as well, hence from one point of view doubly derived, the copy of a copy and as such a diminution, a smaller, weaker version of the authoritative original:

The grandfather of Pierre measured six feet four inches in height; during a fire in the old manorial mansion, with one dash of his foot, he had smitten down an oaken door, to admit the buckets of his negro slaves; Pierre had often tried on his military vest, which still remained an heirloom at Saddle Meadows, and found the pockets below his knees. . . . (29)

Pierre in his “most extended length measures not the proud six feet four of [his] John of Gaunt Sire,” and as the “stature of the warrior is cut down” so is the “glory of the fight” (271).
Pierre's assumption, however, is that his position in the genealogical chain is a matter of "empty nominalness," not "vital realness" (192); for if his name on the one hand seems to bind him to his paternal precursors, on the other it suggests a means of escape. The French origins of his Christian name allow him through a series of substitutions to link himself to another tradition that counters the democratic, revolutionary one represented by his ancestors. This is the one suggested by the mysterious "foreigner" of "noblest birth" and "allied to the royal family" (76) who enchants Pierre's father and perhaps becomes the mother of Isabel. Although the signs of this "foreign feminineness" (76) are less objective, less concrete, than the portrait of Pierre's grandfather—they consist of a "subtle expression of the portrait of [Pierre's] then youthful father" (112), the word "Isabel" written in the interior of a guitar, and a "touch of foreignness in the accent" (113) of the mysterious Isabel—Pierre is so convinced of her reality and her spiritual link to him through Isabel that he willingly breaks the lines linking him to his forefathers and, by a process of substitution based on the French meaning of his Christian name, becomes Peter, the rock on which Christ builds his church rather than the grandson of the old warrior.

At first glance his progress seems significant. Replacing the authority of the grandfather and the father is that of Christ as expressed in "those first wise words, wherewith [he] first spoke in his first speech to men" (91), the Sermon on the Mount. Although Christ's words come to Pierre in the secondary form of the biblical text, he at least no longer has to receive them indirectly and ambiguously by way of the military portrait of his grandfather. And just as he seems to have replaced a physical genealogy with a spiritual one and an interpreted, metaphoric "gospel" by the actual one, so he seems to have turned from the socially and conventionally determined aspects of his name toward its literal meaning. A detailed analysis of this remarkable process of substitution must await a discussion of a set of similar acts, but one can note at this point that Pierre's career is
developing in the context of a series of conflicting but related representations.

This is a process that is at once complicated and illuminated by the narrator's discussion of Pierre's attitudes toward several other portraits that represent the father and associate his authority and power with biblical models. The most interesting of these are the two paintings of his dead father: the one, the drawing room portrait, commissioned by Pierre's mother, painted by a "celebrated artist," portraying the father "during the last and rosiest days of their wedded union" (82-83); the other, the chair portrait, noncommissioned, the product of an amateur, portraying an "unentangled, young bachelor, gayly ranging up and down in the world" (73). The dissimilarity of these "precious memorials" (73) of his father, who is "now dead and irrevocably gone," presents young Pierre with a set of teasing interpretive problems that call for a "careful, candid estimation" (73) and "cunning analysis" (82). Unlike his mother who simply asserts that the chair portrait is not her husband because it does not "correctly . . . convey his features in detail" (72), Pierre is unwilling to reject either portrait and wonders if in some mysterious way the "two paintings might not make only one." Neither is "all of [his] father" (83) but if regarded intertextually, if the "family legend" (73) of the smaller painting is read in the context of the "tales and legends of . . . devoted love" that are "rehearsed" (83) by the other portrait, then the father may be restored to view as if he were actually present. Hence the chair portrait seems to Pierre to contain a strange mystery that he can fancifully solve.

Thus sometimes in the mystical, outer quietude of the long country nights; either when the hushed mansion was banked round by the thick-fallen December snows, or banked round by the immovable white August moonlight; in the haunted repose of a wide story, tenanted only by himself; and sentineling his own little closet; and standing guard, as it were, before the mystical tent of the picture; and ever watching the strangely
concealed lights of the meanings that so mysteriously moved to and fro within; thus sometimes stood Pierre before the portrait of his father, unconsciously throwing himself open to all those ineffable hints and ambiguities, and undefined half-suggestions, which now and then people the soul's atmosphere, as thickly as in a soft, steady snow-storm, the snowflakes people the air. (84)

In this passage the "precious memorial" (73) combines with Pierre's "revered memory of [his] father" (81) to confirm, perhaps to bring back, the plenitude of the dead father. Pierre's ancestral home is figured as a carefully enclosed monument that sustains history and embalms memory by preserving deep inside itself the sign of an authoritative presence even as the Tabernacle of the Hebrews held within a central tent the veiled Ark of the Lord, the Tables of Stone, God's testimony to man (Exod. 25:10–16). While the meanings of the painting remain hidden, the mode of concealment seems, paradoxically, a form of revelation, in the same manner that God remains hidden in the Cloud of Glory that is the sign of his immediate presence and that at times surrounds and protects the sacred Ark. Nor are these impressions simply mystifications, the results of "reveries and trances" that give to the painting the quality of "legendary romance" (85). The arrival of Isabel's letter seems to confirm the portrait's power and to "rip... open as with a keen sword" all the "preceding... mysteries" (85). "Now his remotest infantile reminiscences—the wandering mind of his father—the empty hand, and the ashen—the strange story of Aunt Dorothea—the mystical midnight suggestions of the portrait itself; and, above all, his mother's intuitive aversion, all, all overwhelmed him with reciprocal testimonies" (85). The problem, then, is not that the letter undermines the power and authority of the painted image but rather that it confirms it in a particularly disturbing way, validating the "story of the picture" (74) as narrated by his aunt. For that story had implied that the artist in "stealing" the portrait had "detected" the subject's "innermost secrets" and
“published them in a portrait” (79), thereby conferring upon mental experience the stability of a perceived object. It is precisely because the portrait presents an image of the father in such a palpable and immediate way that Pierre first reverses it on the wall and then removes it entirely, hoping in that way to “banish the least trace of his altered father.” However, “in a square space of slightly discolored wall, the picture still left its shadowy, but vacant and desolate trace” (87), apparently maintaining its validity and influence even while locked away in Pierre’s trunk.

In the strange relativeness, reciprocalness, and transmittedness, between the long-dead father’s portrait, and the living daughter’s face, Pierre might have seemed to see reflected to him, by visible and uncontradictable symbols, the tyranny of Time and Fate. Painted before the daughter was conceived or born, like a dumb seer, the portrait still seemed leveling its prophetic finger at that empty air, from which Isabel did finally emerge. There seemed to lurk some mystical intelligence and vitality in the picture; because, since in his own memory of his father, Pierre could not recall any distinct lineament transmitted to Isabel, but vaguely saw such in the portrait; therefore, not Pierre’s parent, as any way rememberable by him, but the portrait’s painted self seemed the real father of Isabel; for, so far as all sense went, Isabel had inherited one peculiar trait nowhither traceable but to it.

And as his father was now sought to be banished from his mind, as a most bitter presence there, but Isabel was become a thing of intense and fearful love for him; therefore, it was loathsome to him, that in the smiling and ambiguous portrait, her sweet mournful image should be so sinisterly becrooked, bemixed, and mutilated to him. (197)

Here, as in the Paolo-Francesca passage, the usual view of human life as a linear, natural, biological process of generation and procreation is replaced by one that portrays it as a confusing play of images. Although an “unsolid duplicate” of a “vanished
The Entangled Text

solidity” (198), the portrait seems to preserve the power of the dead father. But the procreative authority manifests itself in the form of a “strange transfer” of its own represented “lineaments” to the “countenance of Isabel” (196). The result is that she seems to exist not as a “thing of life . . . but a thing of breath, evoked by the wanton magic of a creative hand” (169) that is itself a representation. The portrait functions, then, to undermine the substantiality of both Pierre’s own and Isabel’s existences, and for that reason he decides to destroy it along with all other external signs of the paternal past.

Since it is the portrait that carries the disturbing trace of the father’s presence, Pierre assumes that his problems will vanish when he burns it and “urn[s it] in the great vase of air” this being the second and final time that he will see his father’s “obsequies performed” (198). To escape from the burden of the past and from ordinary historical and genealogical principles, he believes that he has only to destroy their signs and refuse any longer “to reverse the decree of death, by essaying the poor perpetuating image of the original” (197–98). This plan of action, however, is based on the assumption that the individual exists independently of and has control over the “mementoes and monuments of the past” (197), an assumption that ignores the “myriad alliances and criss-crossings among mankind, the infinite entanglements of all social things, which forbid that one thread should fly the general fabric, on some new line of duty, without tearing itself and tearing others” (191). It is not surprising that the act of burning the portrait and the other contents of the trunk—“packages of family letters and all sorts of miscellaneous memorials in paper” (198)—does not free Pierre from the influence of the past. The entangled aspects of his predicament are implied in the contradictory language he uses to express it. “Thus, and thus, and thus! on thy manes I fling fresh spoils! pour out all my memory in one libation!—so, so, so, lower, lower, lower; now all is done and all is ashes” (198–99). Needless to say Pierre’s metaphors are hopelessly mixed and entangled, implying that he at once feeds the fire and extinguishes
it, rejects his father and celebrates him. And adding to the ambiguity is the fact that in Melville’s day it was generally assumed that the word “pyramid” derived from πῦρ, fire. Since fire ascends in the figure of a cone, it was generally accepted that a pyramid imitates the shape of a flame. So in a certain sense to burn the portrait is but to “mummy it in a visible memorial for every passing beggar’s dust to gather on” (197), or, as Pierre says, to “urn [it] in the great vase of air.”

Subsequent events mark the ambiguity present here. Late in the novel Pierre discovers in a “gallery of paintings recently imported from Europe” (349) a portrait that undermines his assumption that he can free himself from the mediation of all signs and relics. Belonging to another heritage, painted by an “Unknown Hand” (351), portraying a stranger, hence tied to the Glendinning family neither by legend nor by personal reminiscence, the portrait nevertheless represents the father to both Isabel and Pierre. Because Isabel “knew nothing of the painting Pierre had destroyed,” she sees the foreign portrait as signifying the “living being who—under the designation of her father—had visited her at the cheerful house” (352) and also as containing “certain shadowy traces of her own unmistakable likeness” (351). To Pierre, however, it seems a “resurrection of the one he had burnt at the inn” (351). But no matter how the painting is regarded—whether it is seen as the sign of a sign or the sign of a once-living being—it signals the non-presence of the origin, the ambiguity of any inscription of an origin in the present. “Then, the original of this second portrait was as much the father of Isabel as the original of the chair-portrait. But perhaps there was no original at all to this second portrait; it might have been a pure fancy piece” (353). This insight undoes once and for all Pierre’s belief that the presence of his father can ever be located in or constituted by a sign that can then be either worshiped or destroyed. The “resurrection” of the chair portrait in the form of the Stranger’s Head is a repetition that places the entangled issues of genealogy and representation within the context of loss and thereby substitutes a notion of meaning as presence and plenitude with one of meaning as void.
The themes of loss and absence, of course, are woven thickly into the fabric of *Pierre*. The language of the novel is heavy with images of devastating earthquakes, flowing rivers of lava, piles of drifting sand, ruined cities, abandoned excavation sites, and empty and desecrated burial places, all of which associate culture with man's vain attempts to resist the ravages of time and death and situate Pierre's career in a context that robs it of its uniqueness by making it no more than a minor repetition of a process as old as civilization itself. His early naive view of the world is expressed partially by his idealization of his dead father, a process represented by a figurative “shrine of marble” in which stands the perfect marble form of his departed father, a shrine as imposing as that of “Prince Mausolus,” one that manages to take things “evanescent” and make them “unchangeable” and “eternal” (68) and one that remains “spotless and still new as the marble tomb of his of Arimathea” (69). These references to the ruins of Helecarnassus and to Joseph, the rich man of Arimathea who claims Christ's body and buries it in his own tomb, subversively link pagan and Christian burial practices and indirectly introduce the theme of ruined and empty tombs, a theme that becomes explicit with the arrival of Isabel’s letter, which had the destructive force of a volcanic eruption rolling “down on [Pierre's] soul like melted lava, and [leaving] so deep a deposit of desolation, that all his subsequent endeavors never restored the original temples to the soil, nor all his culture completely revived its buried bloom” (67-68). That “one little bit of paper scratched over with a few small characters by a sharpened feather” obliterates the meaning of characters inscribed in marble, for it strips Pierre’s “holiest shrine of all overlaid bloom” and “desecrates” that “casket, wherein he had placed [his] holiest and most final joy” (69). At issue here is the complicated relation between the acts of interment and inscription, both of which seem to mark the point separating man from nature by expressing his humanity. It is significant, for example, that Pierre's first response to the mysterious Isabel, who comes from a world without tombs or inscriptions—“No name; no scrawled
or written thing; no book ... no one memorial ... no gravestone, or mound, or any hillock around the house, betrayed any past burials of man or child" (115)—is to seek out a "remarkable stone, or rather, smoothed mass of rock" (131) bearing the mysterious inscription S ye W. The first of two such objects to occupy his attention, the Memnon Stone or Terror Stone marks the first stage of Pierre's career as the rock of Enceladus does the final one. From one point of view the stone is no more than a "natural curiosity" (133), but the mysterious writing on it gives it a privileged position (one both scriptural and natural), associating it with a remote but human past and investing it with a mystery that seems to justify Pierre's poetical interpretation of its significance.

When in his imaginative ruminating moods of early youth, Pierre had christened the wonderful stone by the old resounding name of Memnon, he had done so merely from certain associative remembrances of that Egyptian marvel, of which all Eastern travelers speak. And when the fugitive thought had long ago entered him of desiring that same stone for his headstone, when he should be no more; then he had only yielded to one of those innumerable fanciful notions, tinged with dreamy painless melancholy, which are frequently suggested to the mind of a poetic boy. But in aftertimes, when placed in far different circumstances from those surrounding him at the Meadows, Pierre pondered on the stone, and his young thoughts concerning it, and, later, his desperate act in crawling under it; then an immense significance came to him, and the long-passed unconscious movements of his then youthful heart, seemed now prophetic to him, and allegorically verified by the subsequent events.

For, not to speak of the other and subtler meanings which lie crouching behind the colossal haunches of this stone, regarded as the menacingly impending Terror Stone ... consider its aspects as the Memnon Stone. ...

Herein lies an unsummed world of grief. For in this plain- tive fable we find embodied the Hamletism of the antique world; the Hamletism of three thousand years ago: "The
flower of virtue cropped by a too rare mischance.” And the English Tragedy is but Egyptian Memnon, Montaignized and modernized; for being but a mortal man Shakespeare had his fathers too. (135)

This suggestive passage focuses directly on two important and related themes: the problematic aspect of funerary monuments and the nature of interpretation. When Pierre first contemplates the “ponderous inscrutableness” (134) he reads its meaning in terms of “associative remembrances” of his Occidental culture’s fascination with the Orient, in particular with the myth of the singing monument said to produce a dirgelike sound at sunrise in the memory of the young boy it commemorates; and then he personalizes his poetic reverie by associating that “sweet boy long since departed in antediluvian times” (134) with himself and imagines that the “imposing pile” will provide him with a fitting headstone.12 This is a process of thought that derives directly from the tradition of romantic nature inscriptions, a tradition expressed by Wordsworth in his “Essays upon Epitaphs,” where he argues that inscribed monuments imply a faith that man is an immortal being by expressing on the one hand the desire of the individual “to survive in the remembrance of his fellows” and on the other a “wish to preserve for future times vestiges of the departed.” This double desire is present in man’s attempt “to give to the language of senseless stone” a voice that assures “that some part of our nature is imperishable.”13 However, as Geoffrey Hartman has noted, inscribing and naming are secondary and elegiac acts that can produce the death feeling they try to deny.14 Pierre’s poetic melancholy is painless precisely because it ignores the elegiac aspects of the stone and imbues it with the force of a living presence.

Nevertheless the stone has a darker side even for the dreamy youth, and that aspect is acknowledged by the other name with which Pierre designates it, the Terror Stone. This is an aspect that emphasizes its anonymous, natural side, for if at times there seems to “lurk” about the stone “some mournful and
lamenting plaint,” at others it seems merely a “Mute Massive-
ness” (134), a “ponderous mass” balanced in such a way as to
create beneath itself a “vacancy” (132), a “horrible interspace”
(134). Considered from this point of view, its “music . . . is lost
among . . . drifting sands” (136) and it becomes the “monument
of a lost significance.” 15

The juxtaposition of the apparently opposing designations—
Memnon Stone and Terror Stone—has the effect of suggesting
other, “subtler meanings which lie crouching behind the colos-
sal haunches” (135) of the sphinxlike stone. Read from the per-
spective of his future recollections, Pierre’s “young thoughts
concerning [the stone]” seem to him at once prophetic and alle-
gorical; and to say that recollection is prophecy, that one’s life is
an allegory, is to say that every individual act derives its mean-
ing or significance from an earlier one that it displaces and re-
peats (often unconsciously) in much the same way that the son
displaces the father in the genealogical chain. Hence in the
“plaintive fable” of Memnon “we find embodied the Hamletism
of the antique world,” the English tragedy being nothing but
the “Egyptian Memnon, Montaignized and modernized; for be-
ing but a mortal man Shakespeare had his fathers too”; and
Pierre’s story, by extension, is yet another repetition of that
“melancholy type” (136).

The implications of this repetition are spelled out in the sec-
ond of the two symbolic stones that mark the stages of Pierre’s
career. The “spinx-like” (345) shape of Enceladus appears in the
text first in the form of a “remarkable dream or vision” that
Pierre experiences during a “state of semi-unconsciousness”
(342), but the dream represents the unwilled return of earlier ex-
periences and reconstitutes them as a form of repetition. The
dream returns him once again to the “blue hills encircling his an-
cestral manor” and surrounds him with another confining and
defining relationship. Since “Nature is not so much her own
ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning al-
phabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each
man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar

92
mind or mood” (342), Pierre now sees the “familiar features” of the landscape in a new and different way. In the same way that the Christian name (The Delectable Mountain) of the Mount of the Titans is displaced by the apparently more appropriate pagan one, so the “hills and swales” of Saddle Meadows that had once seemed to Pierre “sanctified through their long uninterrupted possession by his race” (8) are now read in the context of an older genealogy, that of “Coelus and Terra... incestuous Heaven and Earth” (347).

In Pierre’s vision the landscape of the New World duplicates that of the Old: “curtained by [a] cunning purpleness,” there is “stark desolation; ruin, merciless and ceaseless; chills and gloom,—all here lived a hidden life” (344).

And, as among the rolling sea-like sands of Egypt, disordered rows of broken Sphinxes lead to the Cheopian pyramid itself; so this long acclivity was thickly strewn with enormous rocky masses, grotesque in shape, and with wonderful features on them, which seemed to express that slumbering intelligence visible in some recumbent beasts—beasts whose intelligence seems struck dumb in them by some sorrowful and inexplicable spell. (343)

Among these “spinx-like shapes” (343) is a rock wrought by the “vigorous hand of nature’s self” (346), a natural rather than an intentional object, that is partially uncovered and designated Enceladus by a “strolling company of young collegian pedestrians” (345). As Pierre recalls the “Titan’s armless trunk,” he suddenly sees “his own duplicate face and features” gleaming “upon him with prophetic discomfiture and woe” (346).

This dream vision is the final manifestation of a pattern of doubling that has tormented Pierre from the beginning of the novel. He has resisted being merely the “likeness” (73) and the namesake of his father, the “glass” (90) in which his mother sees her own reflected beauty, and the “personal duplicate” (289) of his hated cousin. But in resisting these familial doublings he is
led at last to see his life as a fated repetition of certain tragic types, first Christ, then the Memnon-Hamlet type, and finally the Enceladus one. This development, moreover, is one that moves from a sense of repetition as a willed reappropriation of the past (as in the cases of Pierre's associating himself with Christ, Memnon, and Hamlet) toward a sense of repetition as an inevitable and unwilled nonhuman movement (as in the case of the dream of Enceladus). And this shift from one mode of repetition to another mirrors a movement at the level of language from the lyricism of the gospels to the silence of senseless stone.

Both of these developments are marked in the novel by the shifting meanings of Pierre's name, which, like his face, would seem to contain and express his uniqueness but which instead suggests to him the extent to which he is contained and defined by others. As we have seen, he attempts to resist being no more than Pierre Glendinning the Third by dedicating himself to what he perceives as a Christ-like duty and associating himself with Peter, the rock on which Christ builds his church. However, this act as well as his assertion that "I am Pierre" (373) calls attention to the literal meaning of his name, and it becomes his fate to live out that meaning, to become at the end a rock "arbored . . . in ebon vines" (362).

The implications of this movement from name to thing are important concerns of Pierre, and they are symbolized most clearly in the related figures of the mountain and the pyramid, a natural object and an intentional representation of it. As I have noted elsewhere, the mountain is a recurring image in Pierre. The novel is dedicated to the "majestic mountain, Greylock," the "sovereign lord and king" of the "amphitheatre over which his central majesty presides," and important functions are given to Mount Sinai, meeting place of God and Moses; the "divine mount," site of Christ's famous sermon; Bunyan's Delectable Mountains, from which the Celestial City may be seen; and Pelion and Ossa, mountains of Thessaly used by the Titans in the war against the gods' stronghold on Mount Olympus. These
“crude forms of the natural earth” are the “cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind or mood” (342). Hence divine speech is associated with mountain tops as first Moses and then Christ, following their pagan predecessors, interpret that “profound Silence,” that “divine thing without a name.”

This process is emblematized in the figure of the pyramid, regarded by Melville as the source of the idea of Jehovah as well as the first work of art. Metaphysically the pyramid seems to suggest permanence, to proclaim a tenacious resistance to the pillages of time, and yet inside it contains decayed human ruins or, more frighteningly, absolutely nothing. “By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there” (285). Like Hegel, Melville is fascinated by the pyramid because it offers him an external man-made form that represents the “forms of the natural earth.” It has the appearance of a natural product and yet conceals as its meaning a hollow void, the sign perhaps of the “horrible interspace” (134) of the Memnon Stone and the “Hollow” (139) of God’s hand. For as Hegel points out, this is the “realm of death and the invisible.” The pyramid, in other words, aptly symbolizes the process of representation itself, for it points to the absence that all signs carry within them. Contained within language is a “Silence” that “permeates all things” (204) and within all man-made objects and inscriptions a hollow void. Hence that “all-controlling and all-permeating wonderfulness, which, when imperfectly and isolatedly recognized by the generality, is so significantly denominated The Finger of God” is not “merely the Finger, it is the whole outspread Hand of God; for doth not Scripture intimate, that He holdeth all of us in the hollow of His Hand?—a Hollow, truly!” (139).

It is the finger of god that inscribes the Tablets of Stone given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 31:18) and that furnishes Christ with the power to give speech to the dumb (Luke 11:14–20).
Inscribed within all cultural constructs and within language itself is a radical absence suggesting an original loss. It is the pyramid situated in the cradle of civilization and the birthplace of the gods that marks the point beyond which it is impossible to go and that at the same time indicates that the moment of origin is not one of plenitude and presence but the sign of a loss. At the beginning for Melville there is already an unrecoverable past signified by the empty sarcophagus, and it is the burden of the present and future architects that no matter how hard they may seek to establish an original relation to the forms of the natural earth, they must inscribe that empty tomb within all their monuments. Implied in the voice of culture is the silence of the tomb.

What then of the acts of writing and reading? How does the reader in the silence of his solitude define his relation to the verbose narrator of *Pierre* and to his “book of sacred truth” (107). This is a problem that is inscribed in the text of *Pierre*. The life of its hero is the story of a reader who attempts to become a writer. His growth is rendered in terms of the development of his interpretive faculties, and his maturity is defined by his decision to “give the world a book” (283). As a youth Pierre is a naive, unquestioning reader of novels, impatient with the “sublime . . . Dante” because his “dark ravings . . . are in eternal opposition to [his] own free-spun shallow dreams” (54) and incapable of understanding even the “superficial and purely incidental lessons” of *Hamlet*, much less of glimpsing the “hopeless gloom of its interior meaning” (169).

The extent to which the content and mode of Pierre’s reading constitute his world is suggested by the fact that the act of reading provides the grid through which all aspects of his early life are seen. His life is an “illuminated scroll” (7); love is a “volume bound in rose-leaves, clasped with violets, and by the beaks of humming-birds printed with peach juice on the leaves of lilies” (34); grief is “still a ghost story” (4); and human relations are intertextual: “‘Read me through and through,’” says Lucy to Pierre, “‘I am entirely thine’” (40). The arrival of Isabel’s letter,
the “fit scroll of a torn as well as a bleeding heart” (65) reveals to Pierre the artificial and conventional structure of this world and produces a new understanding of reading and interpretation: “Oh, hitherto I have but piled up words; brought books, and bought some small experiences and builded me in libraries; now I sit down and read” (91).

One result of this new view of things is that Pierre is able to recuperate a number of memories that to this point in his life have existed as unreadable and meaningless details of his inner world. His dying father’s delirious ravings, his mother’s ambiguous reaction to the chair portrait, and other “imaginings of dimness” that “seemed to survive to no real life” (71) are suddenly rendered intelligible by Isabel’s letter, the pretext that “puts the chemic key of the cipher into his hands; then how swiftly and how wonderfully, he reads all the obscurest and most obliterate inscriptions he finds in his memory; yea, and rummages himself all over, for still hidden writings to read” (70). Nor is the effect limited to the inscriptions of memory. The letter also allows Pierre to read Dante and Shakespeare in a deeper, more profound way, and this rereading leads him to see that “after all he had been finely juggling with himself, and postponing with himself, and in meditative sentimentalities wasting the moments consecrated to instant action” (170).

Isabel’s letter, then, seems to provide a context that renders intelligible textual details that to this point have been unreadable or misread. The full implications of this complicated process, however, are not immediately obvious. But a number of them are illuminated by the narrator’s account of Pierre’s reading of two apparently contradictory texts: the gospel of Matthew and the pamphlet “Chronometricals and Horologicals.” Matthew, of course, is an important text for Pierre, since in his enthusiasm he has decided to model his life on Christ’s, to be directed by those “first wise words, wherewith our Savior Christ first spoke in his first speech to men” (91), the Sermon on the Mount. His “acts” then will be a “gospel” (156) perfectly intelligible and natural if read in the context of his scriptural model.
However, in the darkness and silence of the coach that carries
him and his “mournful party” (104) away from his ancestral
home, Pierre begins to question his conduct, and to escape from
the “evil mood” that becomes “well nigh insupportable,” he
“plunge[s] himself” (207) into a mysterious pamphlet that he has
found.

There is a singular infatuation in most men, which leads them
in odd moments, intermitting between their regular occupa-
tions, and when they find themselves all alone in some quiet
corner or nook, to fasten with unaccountable fondness upon
the merest rag of old printed paper—some shred of a long-
exploded advertisement perhaps—and read it, and study it, and
re-read it, and pore over it, and fairly agonize themselves over
this miserable, sleazy paper-rag, which at any other time, or in
any other place, they would hardly touch with St. Dunstan’s
long tongs. So now, in a degree, with Pierre. But notwith-
standing that he, with most other human beings, shared in
the strange hallucination above mentioned, yet the first
glimpse of the title of the dried-fish-like, pamphlet-shaped rag,
did almost tempt him to pitch it out of the window.

Nevertheless, the silence still continued; the road ran
through an almost unplowed and uninhabited region; the
slumberers still slumbered before him; the evil mood was be-
coming well nigh insupportable to him; so, more to force his
mind away from the dark realities of things than from any
other motive, Pierre finally tried his best to plunge himself
into the pamphlet. (206-7)

Here reading appears as a form of “infatuation” or “hallucina-
tion” the nature of which is “strange” and “unaccountable.” Nev-
evertheless, its function is to fill the voids of doubt, silence, and
loneliness, for it is either that which we do to escape the “dark
realities of things” or that which we do in the face of nothing to
do. Pierre, as he slowly unfingers, unbolts, unrolls, and smooths
out the piece of “waste paper” “accidently left there by some
previous traveller” (206), resembles the person alone at breakfast.
intensely studying the back of an empty cereal box or the one absorbed in a year-old magazine in a doctor’s office, for that which fascinates him is a discarded fragment of the past that now exists independently of its original intent and content. Here then is a situation that seems to promise a totally naive and innocent reading: on the one hand a displaced reader seeking only relief from the loneliness and boredom of everyday life; on the other an orphaned and abandoned text picked up unconsciously and accidentally; a situation, in other words, that seems removed from the vicious cycle of the return of repressed and inhibited desire that previously has marked Pierre’s reading.

Once Pierre becomes absorbed in the pamphlet, however, he discovers that he cannot “master [its] pivot-idea” (292). Indeed, the “more he read and re-read, the more [his] interest deepened, but still the more likewise did his failure to comprehend the writer increase. He seemed somehow to derive some general vague inkling concerning it, but the central conceit refused to become clear to him” (209). Moreover, not only is the pamphlet unreadable but the reason for its being so is itself undecidable.

If a man be in any vague latent doubt about the intrinsic correctness and excellence of his general life-theory and practical course of life; then, if that man chance to light on any other man, or any little treatise, or sermon, which unintendingly, as it were, yet very palpably illustrates to him the intrinsic incorrectness and non-excellence of both the theory and the practice of his life; then that man will—more or less unconsciously—try hard to hold himself back from the self-admitted comprehension of a matter which thus condemns him . . . Again. If a man be told a thing wholly new, then—during the time of its first announcement to him—it is entirely impossible for him to comprehend it. For—absurd as it may seem—men are only made to comprehend things which they comprehended before (though but in the embryo, as it were). Things new it is impossible to make them comprehend, by merely talking to them about it. . . . Possibly, they may afterward come, of themselves, to inhale this new idea from the
circumambient air, and so come to comprehend it; but not otherwise at all. It will be observed, that neither points of the above speculations do we, in set terms, attribute to Pierre in connection with the rag pamphlet. Possibly both may be applicable; possibly neither. (209)

Two possible explanations are offered here for Pierre's inability to comprehend the pamphlet, but neither is presented as absolutely applicable. Worth noting, however, is that both have the effect of seriously limiting the dimensions of reading as an activity. We can read only the old and the familiar, the narrator seems to suggest, that which confirms and supports our normal assumptions and expectations. This is an insight that is confirmed later in the novel when Pierre meets Plotinus Plinlimmon the “ostensible author” (HHM, 336) of the pamphlet, and seeks to re-read and understand it by the “commentary of [his] mystic-mild face” (P, 239). For now having found the “author” he has lost the text.

Pierre must have ignorantly thrust it into his pocket, in the stage, and it had worked through a rent there, and worked its way clean down into the skirt, and there helped pad the padding. So that all the time he was hunting for this pamphlet, he himself was wearing the pamphlet. . . .

Possibly this curious circumstance may in some sort illustrate his self-supposed non-understanding of the pamphlet, as first read by him in the stage. Could he likewise have carried about with him in his mind the thorough understanding of the book, and yet not be aware that he so understood it? (294)

To say that Pierre wears the pamphlet even as he searches for it and that his understanding is an unconscious one is to imply that the act of reading is not so much one of recovery or discovery of an original meaning as it is one of becoming aware of relationships between texts. This is an insight confirmed by the fact that the narrator interrupts and delays his account of the
The Entangled Text

fascinating pamphlet in order to discuss what appears to be another kind of reading and a completely different sort of text,

the earnest reperusal of the Gospels: the intense self-absorption into that greatest real miracle of all religions, the Sermon on the Mount. From that divine mount, to all earnest-loving youths, flows an inexhaustible soul-melting stream of tenderness and loving-kindness; and they leap exulting to their feet, to think that the founder of their holy religion gave utterance to sentences so infinitely sweet and soothing as these; sentences which embody all the love of the Past, and all the love which can be imagined in any conceivable Future. Such emotions as that Sermon raises in the enthusiastic heart; such emotions all youthful hearts refuse to ascribe to humanity as their origin. This is of God! cries the heart, and in that cry ceases all inquisition. (207–8)

Here, of course, the focus is on a sacred text rather than a "sleazy pamphlet"; here reading seems an activity directed toward action in the world rather than a mystified escape from the "dark realities of things." The particular text in question is gospel of St. Matthew, and within it, the account of Christ’s "first wise words . . . in his first speech to men" (91) words that Christ speaks “as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt. 7:29) and that are transcribed by the author with unusual instructions: “whoso readeth, let him understand” (Matt. 24:15). The written text is presented as an authoritative and unambiguous record of speech, thereby restoring for the reader the full presence of Christ’s words. Christ, however, presents himself as Son, as the representative of God the Father, who speaks through him. In that sense his words have a secondary quality, and this aspect of his message is underlined when it is given printed form. As Melville is well aware, Matthew, like the other gospels, was written years after the death of Christ; the identity of its author is questionable; and it is uncertain whether the Greek text is the original or a translation from an earlier Hebrew text. All these aspects signal nonpresence and remind us
that Christ, like Moses, his Old Testament precursor, insists that he can get a voice out of silence and hence resembles certain philosophers who pretend to have found the "Talismanic Secret" that will reconcile man's desire for full presence with the fact of his orphaned existence. "That profound Silence, that only Voice of our God, which I before spoke of; from that divine thing without a name, those impostor philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is as absurd, as though they should say they have got water out of stone; for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?" (208).

The sacred text, then, has inscribed within it the very silence and absence that motivates Pierre to plunge himself into the sleazy pamphlet he finds in the coach, a text that seems to offer a model for human action directly contradicting that of the Sermon on the Mount since it emphasizes the incompatibility of Christian ideals and the practical demands of life in this world. However, as the narrator points out, the pamphlet is more of a "restatement of a problem, than the solution to the problem itself" (210). And, indeed, the apparent differences between the two texts are equivocated by a set of ironic similarities. The pamphlet's parobolic structure—based on a "strange conceit ... apparently one of the plainest in the world; so natural a child might have originated it" and yet "again so profound, that scarce Juggalarius himself could be the author" (210)—and the fact that it exists not as the product of the author who appears to have signed it but is rather his "verbal things, taken down at random, and bunglingly methodized by his young disciples" (290) tie it to its biblical pretext. And this knotted relationship appears to be inevitable rather than accidental since it is the product of a law as basic as that of gravity itself.

Thus over the most vigorous and soaring conceits, doth the cloud of Truth come stealing; thus doth the shot, even of a sixty-two pounder pointed upward, light at last on the earth; for strive we how we may, we cannot overshoot the earth's
orbit, to receive the attractions of other planets; Earth’s law of gravitation extends far beyond her own atmosphere. (261)

All words and conceits are subject to an “insensible sliding process” (7) that mixes and entangles their paths and destines them to return at last to their silent source. Reading consequently is an activity controlled by conceits that promise both wonderment and enlightenment but produce disenchantment and confusion by entangling man in such a complex web of relationships that the “three dextrous maids themselves could hardly disentangle him” (175). Such is Isabel’s experience when she reads a “talismanic word” (147) inscribed in the center of a booklike handkerchief. Before she can decipher the mysterious inscription, she must teach herself to read, and that process radically changes her relation to the world. Up to this point in her life the relation to the man who calls himself her father has been a special and unconventional one.

The word father only seemed a word of general love and endearment to me—little or nothing more; it did not seem to involve any claims of any sort, one way or the other. I did not ask the name of my father; for I could have had no motive to hear him named, except to individualize the person who was so peculiarly kind to me; and individualized in that way he already was, since he was generally called by us the gentleman, and sometimes my father. (145)

For Isabel, at this point, “father” is simply the “word of kindness and of kisses” (124), a word that raises neither the problem of origins nor of authority, for it implies only the “tenderness and beautifulness of humanness” (122). Although when she looks in the pool of water behind the house, she sees the “likeness—something strangely like, and yet unlike, the likeness of his face” (124), the play of images does not generate sinister ambiguities but simply confirms her sense of the value of the
human “in a world of snakes and lightnings, in a world of hor-
rible and inscrutable inhumanities” (122). Her father, however,
on the last visit to her before his death, leaves behind a handker-
chief bearing in its middle a “small line of faded yellowish writ-
ing” that becomes for her a “precious memorial.”

But when the impression of his death became a fixed thing to
me, then again I washed and dried and ironed the precious
memorial of him, and put it away where none should find it
but myself . . . and I folded it in such a manner, that the name
was invisibly buried in the heart of it, and it was like opening
a book and turning over many blank leaves before I came to
the mysterious writing, which I knew should be one day read
by me, without direct help from any one. Now I resolved to
learn my letters, and learn to read, in order that of myself I
might learn the meaning of those faded characters. . . . I soon
mastered the alphabet, and went on to spelling, and by-and-by
to reading, and at last to the complete deciphering of the talis-
manic word—Glendinning. I was yet very ignorant. Glendin-
nning, thought I, what is that? It sounds something like
gentleman;—Glen-din-ing;—just as many syllables as gentleman;
and—G—it begins with the same letter; yes, it must mean my
father. I will think of him by that word now:—I will not
think of the gentleman, but of Glendinning. . . . as I still grew
up and thought more to myself, that word was ever humming
in my head; I saw it would only prove the key to more.
(146-47)

The inscribed handkerchief that is abandoned by “chance”
and found “lying on the uncarpeted floor” (146) is an object
totally separated from its originating source, cut loose from the
authority who could testify to the meaning of the “faded yellow-
ish writing” on it. (Is its author the gentleman’s wife, his sister
who initials his neckcloths, or some anonymous seamstress like
those who sew “in concert” at Miss Pennies’s house?) Conse-
quently the meaning of the word does not lie behind or within
it but in its relation to other words and social conventions. For
Isabel the word “Glendinning” does not stand first in the place
The Entangled Text

of a person but in the place of another word, "gentleman," which it echoes, supplements, and particularizes. Ironically, it is this orphaned sign that leads Isabel to the second and even more problematic key to her origins, the word "Isabel" "gilded" in the "heart of [her] guitar" (148). Even more than the handkerchief the guitar, having been purchased by Isabel from a peddler who had "got it in barter from the servants" (152) at the Glendinning estate, is a free-floating object, and the origins and meaning of the word in its interior are more mysterious than that of the one written on the handkerchief. Does it refer to the guitar’s maker, to its owner, or to neither? As a given name rather than a patronym it is more clearly an object in its own right, its signification determined completely by the circumstances in which it functions, a truth that is confirmed by the fact that Isabel claims the name as her own only after she has read it in the guitar, having to this point “always gone by the name of Bell” (148).

These two words, concealed in the interiors of the handkerchief and guitar and associated by Isabel with her absent parents, function for her as the keys that unlock and reveal a previously hidden set of relationships. These keys, however, are ambiguously inside the objects whose meanings they are supposed to unlock, and their significance derives from a set of purely arbitrary associations. In this sense Isabel as a reader may be said to be the author of her own parentage, since she has arrested the motion of two free-floating words and placed them within a genealogical order that is partially discovered, partially invented. And Pierre, through his reading and interpretation of the note that proclaims Isabel’s relation to this order, entangles himself in a “fictitious alliance” (175) that will lead him at last to his decision to “gospelize the world anew” (273).18

This process is the one the narrator refers to when he insists that “to a mind bent on producing some thoughtful thing of absolute truth, all mere reading is apt to prove an obstacle hard to overcome” (283). Since the only nontexual reality is the silence of the crude forms of the natural earth, any act of speaking and
writing is bound to be a repetition, a displacement or a representation of a purely textual entity and necessarily derived, secondary, and inessential. This is the perception that marks the text of *Pierre*, a book that is written against the “countless tribes of common novels and countless tribes of common dramas” as well as against those “profounder emanations of the human mind” (141); yet it is doomed to absorb and repeat them. Empty conventions from the domestic sentimental novel—the country-city setting, the incest theme, the dark and light ladies, the romantic symbols of guitar and portrait—combine with references to Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and others to produce a text that undermines the notion of writing as original creation and reading as an authentic act of discovery. “Had Milton’s been the lot of Casper Hauser,” the narrator insists, “Milton would have been as vacant as he” (259). Hence the writer is portrayed as a whore who sells herself for money—“careless of life herself, and reckless of the germ life she contains”; as an actor in an empty melodrama performing a part not written by him—“only hired to appear on the stage, not voluntarily claiming the public attention” (258); and as an improvisator, echoing the music of others and creating off-hand, on the spur of the moment, variations on any proposed subject—“it is pleasant to chat . . . ere we go to our beds; and speech is further incited, when like strolling improvisators of Italy, we are paid for our breath” (259). Correspondingly the reader is portrayed as a victim of this “lurking insincerity . . . of written thoughts,” the enchanted dupe of books whose leaves “like knavish cards” are “covertly packed” (339). For that “wonderful” and mysterious “story” of the illegitimate and orphaned child may have been “by some strange arts . . . forged for her, in her childhood, and craftily impressed upon her youthful mind; which so—like the mark in a young tree—had enlargingly grown with her growth, till it had become the immense staring marvel” (354). Her story like all stories is inevitably genealogical; it resembles a family tree that “annually puts forth new branches” (9), but it also bears a “mark” that at once implies the activity of an
originating intention and signifies our distance from it. For it points not to the authoritative source but to the tangle of other such inscriptions scattered throughout the text of Pierre, inscriptions that haunt both writer and reader as do the faces of Marianna and Isabel.