The Arbiters of Reality
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When I began this project, my aim was to understand how the narrative innovations of antebellum fiction responded to the practices of an emerging mass journalism. At a time when the popular conception of reality was being transformed by a centralizing and commercializing newspaper culture; by technologies such as the electromagnetic telegraph, the daguerreotype, and the moving panorama; and by savvy entrepreneurs such as P. T. Barnum, antebellum writers of fiction seemed to have an important argument to make about the dangerous mingling of information and entertainment taking place in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. As part of this planned study, I would consider the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, whose approaches to storytelling seemed to respond to the various informational media and representational practices that defined early mass culture. Like many new historical scholars writing about these two authors in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I saw these two writers as astute cultural theorists who were concerned about the integrity of American democratic debate; and so, in my chapters on Hawthorne and Melville, the plan was to place their fictions in particular discursive contexts (the early days of the penny press revolution; the rise of telegraphy), thereby illustrating how the narrative strategies of these works exposed and combated the disturbing implications of the antebellum commercial revolution.

As I began digging into these rich contexts, however, and as I worked my way through each author’s lesser-known writing (both public and private), it became increasingly clear that the romantic author’s attention to what we today call the constructed nature of reality was something more complex than a cultural critique and would perhaps benefit from a more
sustained and focused investigation. While I had initially assumed that these authors obsessively attended to the artifice of antebellum information culture to help their audience understand the implications of their superficial cultural practices, and while critics today often talk about romantic fiction as an attempt at refashioning the popular reader into a more engaged and reflective kind of citizen, this aspect of their writing seemed most meaningful to me as a language through which the literary artist invoked mass cultural practice as the antithesis of romantic belief. Though new historicism, in reconnecting the antebellum literary artist to the social, cultural, and political contexts of antebellum life, can now easily imagine the romancer as the engaged, even reform-minded critic of society, Hawthorne and Melville exhibited a relationship to their culture that I found conspicuously, well, romantic.

What eventually emerged out of these early findings is the following two-author study, an examination of how Hawthorne and Melville defined themselves and their art against the informational practices of an emergent mass culture. As my title suggests, I am arguing that these authors imagined themselves, in public and in private, as “arbiters of reality”—privileged seers who portrayed the antebellum commercial revolution as a threat to the very stability of truth. It is, of course, a cliché of postmodern culture to place the word “reality” inside scare quotes, to highlight how the various media that dominate our lives bombard us with images and words that construct not only particular truth claims but also the very category of the real. What Hawthorne’s and Melville’s writing suggests to us today is that seeing through the artifice of the media that surround us, and treating “reality” as a word that is always to be put inside of quotation marks, is a way of inventing and maintaining a particular kind of self. Amid a range of cultural forms offering highly contrived ideals of “authenticity,” the romancer treated the critical ability to recognize the fraudulent surfaces of culture, and the artistic capacity to recast the authentic as that which resists linguistic and visual representation, as the defining achievements of autonomous, uncompromised selfhood.

My goal is to trace the emergence of this romantic logic in each author’s writing and to illustrate how their narrative art was fundamentally dependent on the existence of a mass marketplace in which reality was very much for sale. As I will suggest, one danger of sharing with Hawthorne and Melville the view that blithely sees through those images and stories peddled as truth in the marketplace is that it renders us incapable of asking why (as consumers, artists, or critics; in the nineteenth century, or today) we are so preoccupied with the nature of reality in the first place. What makes these authors so relevant to our own reality-obsessed culture
is that their vivid imaginations keep coming back from the boundless realm of romance to the un
reality of popular journalism and those other textual surfaces of American mass culture. In essence, the goal of this study is not to unveil our current media age as the triumph of capitalism but to recast the persistent American belief in a reality uncorrupted by commercialization as the powerful legacy of romanticism.