The Arbiters of Reality

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NATHANIEL Hawthorne’s notebook from 1844 includes the following entry: “A dream, the other night, that the world had become dissatisfied with the inaccurate manner in which facts are reported, and had employed me, with a salary of a thousand dollars, to relate things of public importance exactly as they happen.” At first glance, this brief passage hardly seems noteworthy. As his numerous biographers tell us, and as his letters from this era vividly reveal, by 1844 Hawthorne was growing increasingly worried about financially supporting his expanding family, and so the dream’s apparent preoccupation with the question of compensation affirms the long-standing view of an author struggling to navigate the vicissitudes of the marketplace. Read on another level, however, the notebook entry challenges the popular image of the quintessential American romancer, the writer of “fancy-pictures” whose fiction unapologetically leaves behind the mere “realities of the moment.” Hawthorne’s dream, as he recorded it, suggests a writer whose authorial identity is dependent not on his imagination but on his ability to relate important events “exactly as they happen.” In a world riddled with inaccuracies, Hawthorne dreamed of himself as the privileged arbiter of the line between truth and lies.

Intriguingly, Hawthorne was not alone in imagining himself in such terms. In 1850 Herman Melville wrote (and anonymously published) “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” a brilliant, rambling essay on the literary greatness of his fellow romantic author. Melville writes that great literary artists like Shakespeare—and, by implication, Hawthorne—probe at what he calls “the very axis of reality.” The essay goes on, in perhaps its most
famous formulation, to define the genuine author as a truth-teller in an unreal world: “For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches” (244). Here Melville depicts “Truth” as something in danger and in flight, a “scared white doe” fleeing an encroaching “world of lies.” If truth is forced to fly, as Melville tells us it is, such an articulation opposes the present day in which he writes with an implied past, a prelapsarian time (defined against “this world”) when truth was presumably unthreatened. Most significantly, it is in the very act of telling this story about the contemporaneous status of reality that Melville reserves for the literary genius a singular cultural role: in Melville’s essay, as in Hawthorne’s dream, the true author enjoys a privileged access to an obfuscated “axis of reality” and a transhistorical awareness of the crisis posed by “this world of lies.” Hence the contradiction at the heart of Melville’s ideal of literary genius: while he invokes Shakespeare and “other masters” to distance his account of greatness from historical or cultural specificity, his description of “Truth” fleeing “this world of lies” situates the literary genius squarely within a particular historical narrative.

As badly as Melville wants to define genius by its disconnection from any place or time, the story he tells in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” quietly marks him as a product of his cultural moment. For it is not hard to understand how Melville, writing in 1850, could imagine “reality” as a category that needed to be illuminated or clarified. As Andie Tucher has written, “Antebellum America was a jamboree of ballyhoo, exaggeration, chicanery, sham, and flim-flam; [it] literally invented the word bunkum.” This was, after all, the era of both penny press journalism and P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, two cultural forms that unapologetically, even gleefully, merged slippery ideals of authenticity with the goal of profit-making in courting their audiences. Indeed, according to scholars of both Barnum and the penny press phenomenon, during these years the consumption of highly unstable forms of authenticity emerged as a defining practice of a burgeoning mass audience. In his landmark discussion of Barnum’s idiosyncratic art, Neil Harris famously illustrated that U.S. audiences in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s exhibited a “national tolerance for clever imposture.” And much more recently, James W. Cook has expanded this approach to antebellum culture in revealing that “artful deception was one of the main currents in American popular culture during the Age of Barnum.” In other words, the criteria of authenticity signified during this era not merely as a question of fact and fraud but also
“as a more slippery mode of middle-class play.” In the words of another critic, Barnum’s exhibitions—such as his notorious “Feejee Mermaid,” or Joice Heth, whom he promoted as a 161-year-old former slave of George Washington—depended “less on a massive duping of the public than on the mobilization of a dynamic in which deception and enlightenment operate together as inextricable complements.”

Like the example of Barnum, the story of the penny press suggests how the language of truth functioned in the antebellum marketplace as a salient and unstable feature of consumer culture. Beginning in the early 1830s, the first penny papers—cheap, daily productions that catered to the appetites of the masses—appeared in northeastern American cities. James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald*, first published in May of 1835, announced itself as a publication “equally intended for the great masses of the community—the merchant, mechanic, working people—the private family as well as the public school—the journeyman and his employer—the clerk and his principal.” In covering sensational stories such as the 1836 murder of New York prostitute Helen Jewett, “penny editors assured their readers again and again that they printed nothing but the truth and cared for nothing but the good of the public.” And yet even as such journalism was characterized by a grandiose commitment to unearthing “authentic facts,” what made such news so popular was the vivid, highly readable style in which a good story was far more important than objectivity or verifiability. In the words of Ronald Zboray, who links the rise of penny press journalism to the demise of newspaper fiction, “fact often competed with fiction in the antebellum newspaper” to the point that “sometimes the distinctions between the two blurred.”

By the mid-1840s penny press journalism would grow increasingly reliant on technologies such as the electromagnetic telegraph, steam power, and the expanding rail system. Bennett and *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, for example, continually sought to outmaneuver one another by organizing rail expresses to carry “authentic news” received from European steamships as soon as they docked in places like Halifax. Thus, while the journalistic stories that penny-a-day newspapers presented to readers in the 1840s were often packaged in an emerging language of timeliness, reliability, and efficiency, this link to reality was becoming more valuable as an economic commodity.

The present study argues that the romantic author’s claim to a more foundational understanding of reality was a by-product of both the increasingly mediated nature of antebellum life and the status of “reality” during these years as a constitutive category of mass cultural participation. My chapters situate the narrative idiosyncrasies of Hawthorne’s and Mel-
ville’s romantic fiction in specific cultural settings—Salem in 1830, for example, or New York City in 1846–47—to illustrate how the romantic “Art of Telling the Truth” was shaped by the representational technologies and practices of a nascent mass culture. As I hope to reveal, we can comprehend the romancer’s self-invention as a more authentic kind of truth-teller only if we read the storytelling machinery of romance against the kinds of truth claims it rejects as inauthentic. Paul Gilmore writes of the antebellum era, “If the market revolution meant, as Marx put it, that ‘All that is solid melts into air,’ many male authors positioned themselves as cultural authorities by promising access to a more solid ground beyond the market’s illusions.”

By recognizing how these authors invoked, refined, and critiqued a range of narrative practices and representational ideals that circulated during these years (including penny press and telegraphic journalism, moving panoramas, and daguerreotypy), we see the romance as one of many representational modes that emerged out of the antebellum commercial revolution—and we come to a clearer understanding of how the “very axis of reality” appeared to the romantic subject as a stable foundation on which to articulate a self.

To begin to understand how the dynamic conditions of antebellum culture shaped ideals of romantic authorship, chapter 1 takes us back to the early rumblings of the penny press revolution. The chapter describes the 1830 murder of Captain Joseph White of Salem, carefully interrogating the journalistic coverage of the murder and the ensuing trials in the local and regional press. As I reveal, Bennett traveled to Salem to capture, in his brilliantly lurid and dramatic manner, the details of the murder and trials for newspaper readers back in New York City. By highlighting how Salem’s two newspapers responded to Bennett’s presence, I argue that Salemites (including a young Nathaniel Hawthorne) were grappling not merely with the way their town was being represented in an urban-centered, nationalizing journalistic marketplace but also with what many considered a new type of reality. Using the dynamic example of the Salem Murder to illustrate the implications of the impending penny press revolution, I examine Hawthorne’s idiosyncratic response to the murder scandal to locate the young author at a time and place where the very definition of reality was undergoing a cataclysmic transformation.

The second chapter moves from Hawthorne’s hometown to the pages of his early fiction, where he rewrote the White murder in a little-known story that has a great deal to teach us about the philosophical preoccupations of his early career. Situating the narrative strategies of Hawthorne’s early (and ultimately abandoned) Story Teller collection within the specific context of the Salem Murder and the nascent penny press phenom-
enon, I explore how his early writing claimed for its author a cultural authority as an arbiter of the line between truth and fiction. Many of the Story Teller pieces, I reveal, answered the sensationalistic practices of the newspaper—including “The Ambitious Guest,” in which Hawthorne rewrote the true story of an avalanche that killed a New England family, changing important details so as to protect his fictional family from the grisly sensationalism that marked the journalistic coverage of the original catastrophe. The chapter suggests that the narrative concerns of Hawthornean romance found their first expression in this early fiction, where the romantic art of truth-telling was presented as an antidote to the fictions of a commercializing and nationalizing journalism.

Chapter 3 advances this sense of Hawthorne as an arbiter of the real by exploring how both his private and public writings continually redefine “reality” as that which cannot be contained or represented by contemporaneous media such as newspapers, panoramas, or daguerreotypic images. Encompassing a broad range of texts—including “The Old Manse,” “Main Street,” several of Hawthorne’s notebook entries, and The House of the Seven Gables—the chapter treats the romance as a way of looking at mass culture, one that obsessively attends to its representational surfaces in order to oppose the transformation of the individual into a mass subject. While critics have long celebrated Hawthorne’s sense of American public life as a realm of theatricality and spectacle, I highlight the rhetorical dimensions of such a mode of cultural witnessing by revealing how it afforded the author an imagined refuge from the otherwise inescapable process of modernization. Carefully examining the narrative techniques that appear in both his notebook writing and his published fiction, I argue that Hawthorne approached the practice of linguistic representation as a way of articulating a romantic consciousness undeluded by cultural fictions. Hawthornean romance thus emerges as an ongoing dialogue with contemporaneous representational practices, a means of self-invention that continually invoked and rejected the premises of mass subjectivity.

Turning to Melville, chapter 4 looks at the role played by the emergent ideal of telegraphic communication in the coverage of the Mexican War in New York from 1846 to 1848. At a time when American journalism was churning out broad and consequential myths about American expansion, Mexican inferiority, and racial heterogeneity as a threat to national cohesiveness—all under the aegis of a technology-based claim to infallible and instantaneous communication—Melville published a little-known series of satirical sketches that portrayed Mexican War journalism as a Barnumesque form of humbug. To comprehend Melville’s relationship
to the journalistic production of the Mexican War, this chapter examines how the coverage of the war in New York newspapers relied on a new telegraphic ideal to bring local readers in contact not only with the story of the war itself but also with a broader story about American identity and racial difference. By relocating Melville’s “Old Zack” anecdotes in the periodical culture in which they first appeared, I suggest that Melville’s ongoing sense of the true artist as a visionary in a “world of lies” was shaped in important ways by popular journalism’s political and economic exploitation of new information technologies and by emergent forms of mass cultural participation.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace how Melville’s critique of national and racial mythmaking are reworked in two of his better-known works, *Typee* and “Benito Cereno,” treating the author’s exposure of storytelling as a tool of racial and cultural exploitation as a by-product of his fraught relationship to mass culture. In *Typee*, for example, the ongoing attention to the surfaces of both American and Typee cultures is read not through the lens of postcolonial theory but as an attitude toward reality that reflected Melville’s own location in an American information culture being redefined by both the emergence of a mass journalistic audience and the promise of national (and global) telegraphic connectedness. By attending to Melville’s use of telegraphy as a crucial narrative symbol, I ask that we consider the text’s refusal to penetrate into the secrets of Typee culture as a response to the telegraphic age Melville returned to, in 1844, after four years abroad. Ultimately, the author’s use of telegraphic symbolism as a paradigm for seeing into Typee culture allowed Melville to keep both the American and Typee cultures of information in view and at a safe distance. Standing outside of each of these communication networks, the author of *Typee* claims to occupy a transcultural space that epitomizes the Melvillean self.

In turning to Melville’s famous invocation of slavery, “Benito Cereno,” chapter 6 explores how the author places the authentic reality of slavery beyond the reach of storytelling—at the very moment hundreds of thousands of American readers were encountering slavery in the pages of popular fiction. In attending to the ways in which Melville’s “ruthless democracy on all sides” is fraught with a barely disguised hostility to “the tribe of general readers,” I ask that we understand the narrative complexities of “Benito Cereno” as a vehicle for keeping these opposing forces in balance. By critiquing the racist logic of Delano’s story-seeking mind, I argue, Melville opposes both slavery and the mass reading public and thus asserts his own idiosyncratic authority over the inauthentic surfaces of antebellum culture. At the same time, I juxtapose the narrative idiom
of “Benito Cereno” alongside the narrative innovations of William Wells Brown, the ex-slave abolitionist author. Critics have long talked about Brown’s formal idiosyncrasies—his evasion of a first-person autobiographical voice, his borrowings from various sources in the genre-defying *Clotel*—as an authorial reaction to the prefabricated “voice” imposed upon the black eyewitness by white abolitionism. By choosing not to approach “Benito Cereno” as a distinctly racialized response to the model of white authorship exemplified by Harriet Beecher Stowe—and instead reading the novella as a text that signifies Melville’s moral outrage and his genuine concern for the fate of his country—we maintain a subtle but consequential double standard: Brown’s narrative innovations have long been understood as a language of self-invention, shaped by Brown’s racialized subject position as an ex-slave; “Benito Cereno,” however, continues to serve as evidence of Melville’s near-miraculous sensitivity to timeless epistemological, linguistic, and moral truths. Against such a view, I argue that “Benito Cereno” epitomizes a white model of romantic selfhood in which the fully realized human can be articulated only by disavowing the surface-oriented epistemology of the mass subject (Amasa Delano, the “blunt thinking American”), and probing into the “very axis of reality.”

Throughout these chapters, I contrast the truth-telling claims of “romance” with the marketplace ideal of “authenticity,” two terms that require clarification and context. Though I invoke the word “authenticity” in characterizing a range of antebellum forms and practices, in no way do I mean to imply that a deluded public naively believed it was purchasing unvarnished or antimarket truths from either an obvious humbug artist such as Barnum or an entrepreneurial journalist such as Bennett. Rather, I will be using the term “authenticity” to denote the way in which particular cultural forms sought to exploit the category of reality in the mass marketplace. Whether or not audiences saw through the overwrought, sensationalistic postures of penny press writing, Bennett, like Barnum, courted an audience by claiming to capture the real world—so that the claim of authenticity, however suspect, nonetheless functioned as the basis of journalism’s commercial appeal. At the same time, my use of “authenticity” refers to the way in which a product invites its consumer to participate in a “reality” shared with an imagined mass public—whether by following the story of an actual murder investigation in the *Herald*, by interrogating the “authentic” wooden leg of the Mexican general Antonio López de Santa Anna in the American Museum, by debating the portrayal of American slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or by participating in the virtual tourism offered by the Mississippi River panoramas of the late 1840s. Sometimes, as in the case of Barnum or Ben-
nett, such “authenticity” was understood to be highly contrived; in other cases, as with daguerreotypy or telegraphy, a technology thrived precisely because it appeared to offer a lack of mediation and contrivance.

In the romantic mind, all of these practices and technologies were equally unreal, not simply because of their commercial nature but because they threatened to make reality the domain of the masses. Departing from current critical practice, my use of the term “romance” will refer to a particular mode of storytelling that carefully, even obsessively, invoked and rejected the truth claims of those cultural practices responsible for commodifying the real and peddling it before the mass public. Of course, it is not that Hawthorne or Melville writes only about purely imaginative places or figures (see, for example, The Blithedale Romance, a roman à clef based on Hawthorne’s time as a member of Brook Farm, the Utopian community) but that the romancer takes great pains, in his prefaces and within the complex machinery of his storytelling, to assure his audience that he enjoys a more rarefied and refined understanding of the nature of reality than is available in the popular marketplace, where claims of authenticity are mere commodities. And so I read the romance as a reactive form, one that sought to protect reality from (what it portrays as) the fictionalizing forces of modernization by redefining the real as that which eludes specific technologies and modes of consumption.

When we recognize the romance as an attempt at negating the terms of antebellum culture, it comes as no surprise that romance often seems an almost perfect rhetorical counterpoint to that other controversial mode of mid-nineteenth-century truth-telling, the art of humbuggery. Indeed, nearly sixty years ago, Richard Chase noted the apparent symmetry between the showman and the romancer: “Looking back after one hundred years,” Chase wrote, “we perceive a certain unity in American culture which embraces the kinds of thought and feeling represented by Barnum’s scientific museum and Melville’s Moby-Dick. Yet the difference is that most important of all differences: the one between art and other forms of organizing experience.” While Barnum’s “operational aesthetic” invited his audiences to investigate the surfaces of his often carefully manufactured exhibits, an artist such as Hawthorne felt the need to warn his reader, as he does in the famous preface to The House of the Seven Gables, that “it exposes the romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing his fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment” (3).

And again we see the romancer invoking and rejecting the “inflexible” and “dangerous” practices of Barnum’s America in “The Artist of the Beautiful,” Hawthorne’s famous tale of misread genius. At the
conclusion of the story, Owen Warland presents his artistic masterpiece, a mechanical butterfly who appears as fluid and natural as nature itself, to the literal-minded Robert Danforth (a man “who spends his labor on a reality”) and his bride, Annie. As if they are staring at Barnum’s “Mermaid” or scrutinizing the notorious “Automaton Chess-Player” exhibited by Johann Nepomuk Maelzel in the early nineteenth century, Annie can only ask, “Tell me if it be alive, or whether you created it.”18 “Wherefore ask who created it, so be it beautiful?” the artist replies. Unable to categorize Warland’s creation as either real or humbug, Danforth concludes, “That goes beyond me, I confess!” (928). Moments before the butterfly dies in the hands of Robert and Annie’s child, Warland, in lieu of justifying his creation as “a gem of art” (928) to the couple, “smiled, and kept the secret to himself” (929). Of course, as the laboring author who must appear in the marketplace, Hawthorne does not keep the secret to himself but instead uses the shallow distinctions of the public to offset his depiction of the true artist—thereby finding for the romantic author a literary identity as the figure who can appear in the marketplace, but only as he who protects reality from the inflexible hands of the masses. As the story concludes, the reader is told that Warland “had caught a far other butterfly than this. When the artist rose high enough to achieve the Beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes, while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the Reality” (931). And so Hawthorne stands between the reader and what the artist considers to be the real, pointing outward at the public’s superficial modes of consumption while nodding inward, beneath the surface of the printed page, to highlight for his readers what they can neither touch nor understand.

This sense of romantic fiction as a subversion of the specific authenticating practices of mass culture is also illustrated in the trajectory of Melville’s early career. After publishing Typee and Omoo, the two fact-based accounts of his exploits abroad that launched his career, Melville grew increasingly frustrated with those readers who doubted the truthfulness of his narratives. In an 1848 letter to his English publisher, John Murray, Melville writes: “By the way, you ask again for ‘documentary evidence’ of my having been in the South Seas, wherewithall to convince the unbelievers—Bless my soul, Sir, will you Britons not credit that an American can be a gentleman, have read the Waverly Novels, tho every digit may have been in the tar-bucket?—You make miracles of what are commonplaces to us.—I will give no evidence—Truth is mighty & will prevail—and shall & must.”19 In the fall of 1846, following the publication of Typee, Melville responded to a similar request by Murray (seeking physical proof that he
had spent time in the Marquesas) with the complaint, “how indescrib-
ably vexatious, when one really feels in his very bones that he has been
there, to have a parcel of blockheads question it!” But in the 1848 rejec-
tion, Melville goes further than he had before, defining his own ideal of
“Truth” by rejecting the logic of documentation underlying his audience’s
requests.

The 1848 letter is noteworthy also for the way in which it formulates
a theory of “romance” that unabashedly opposes an imagined popular
audience who misunderstands the nature of reality. Describing his next
project (which would end up as Mardi), Melville informs Murray: “My
object in now writing you—I should have done so ere this—is to inform
you of a change in my determinations. To be blunt: the work I shall next
publish will [be] in downright earnest a ‘Romance of Polynesian [sic]
Adventure’—But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation
of being a romancer in disguise has at last pricked me into a resolution to
show those who may take any interest in the matter, that a real romance of
mine is no Typee or Omoo, & is made of different stuff altogether. This I
confess has been the main inducement in altering my plans” (Correspon-
dence 106). Here Melville envisions the genre of “romance” as both a
confrontation of the literary marketplace’s arbitrary practices of documen-
tation and a path to artistic freedom. Indeed, “romance” functions in the
passage as a literary form whose deeper understanding of reality is coex-
tensive with an assertion of romantic autonomy: to see the Barnumesque
dependence on “documentary evidence” as a hollow and misguided way
of understanding truth is to locate an authorial identity apart from “the
parcel of blockheads” who make up the imagined masses.

And, sure enough, when Mardi appeared in 1849, it included the fol-
lowing preface: “Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyag-
es in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity,
the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian
adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might
not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my
previous experience. . . . This thought was the germ of others, which have
resulted in Mardi.” Critics often speak of works such as The Confidence-
Man or “Benito Cereno” as hoaxes, as confidence games that Melville
plays with his reader. And yet to call one’s novel The Confidence-Man
is, I would argue, to define one’s own mode of truth-telling against the
con man’s mode of trickery and deceit. In much the same manner, if this
strange preface might seem to portray Mardi as a kind of hoax, to intro-
duce one’s work of fiction as a work of fiction is hardly to attempt to
delude the public. Instead, Melville defines the “romance” that will follow
against the slippery, even reversible ideals of a popular audience that loves to be humbugged; that is, he attempts to locate himself outside an entire marketplace of truth claims that he portrays as groundless fictions. Given that, as Neil Harris points out, the question of authenticity regarding Typee likely fueled its popularity in Barnum’s America, it should not surprise us that Melville would come to equate (in works such as Moby-Dick, “Benito Cereno,” and The Confidence-Man) the rejection of the very premises of authentication as a declaration of artistic and intellectual independence.

Of course, Hawthorne and Melville were far from the only writers of the American Romantic era to define themselves against the sham authenticities of the marketplace. Henry David Thoreau, for example, saw the newspaper as “the froth & scum of the eternal sea,” a realm that (like the nearby town of Concord) afforded him a rhetorical counterweight for his own self-invention as arbiter of the line between “the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe” and the “hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality.” The language of reality that characterizes his romantic drive for individual autonomy suggests how deeply the romantic consciousness was indebted to the logic of authenticity that permeated so many cultural forms and practices. In one of many examples of Thoreau’s rhetorical use of the newspaper, for example, he writes, “I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed . . .—we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over tea” (Walden, 64). Here Thoreau relies on the reading practices of the masses, and on the broader representative logic of mass culture (according to which characters and events stand in for types), to foreground his own location in the eternal realm of philosophy.

To further make his point, he elsewhere invokes Morse’s famous invention as a way of asserting his own location outside the information network that was rapidly imagining the nation as a unified body, with telegraph wires serving as its metaphorical nervous system: “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate” (Walden, 35). Of course, Thoreau’s invocation of telegraphy, of information exchange, of the newspaper, complicates his very assertion of cultural autonomy. For Thoreau, to be a philosopher is to concern oneself with the kind of truths that are distinctly not merely informational and cannot be contained by the technologies and practices of mass communication.
Admonishing his reader to “be your own telegraph” (Walden, 13), Thoreau transforms the very technology that (even more than the railroad) symbolized mass connectedness into a marker of authentic individualism.

In a somewhat different manner, Walt Whitman’s 1855 “Song of Myself” (still untitled at that point) imagines “reality” as something comprising not only the kinds of representations available in the antebellum marketplace but also the less effable truths beyond the reach of commerce:

My words are words of a questioning, and to indicate reality;
This printed and bound book…. but the printer and the printing-office boy?
The marriage estate and settlement…. but the body and mind of the bridegroom? also those of the bride?
The panorama of the sea…. but the sea itself?
The well-taken photographs…. but your wife or friend close and solid in your arms? (76)

Against the representations of the “printed and bound book,” the panorama, and the photograph, Whitman defines the realm of romantic poetry as a way of indicating a “reality” that is—if not, like Thoreau’s romantic reality, a negation of mass cultural terminology—able to embrace both the market’s representations and the less effable sort of meaning that reproducible pictures and words can never contain. Whitman’s famous career change from journalist to poet seems to quietly echo beneath the parallelism of the above lines: squarely at the left margin are books, panoramas, photographs; but as we move across the page, away from the artificial borders of the print shop and into the “organic” rhythms of his free verse, we get humanity—so that only in contrast to artifice do we get what the poet calls the “reality” that popular representations inherently fail to contain. As Mark Bauerlein argues, Whitman’s goal is a poetic language in which “the word can be made contiguous or coexistent with the event . . . not distantly representational.”26 This desire to overcome the mediation of language reflects the increasingly mediated nature of antebellum life; for, as Whitman suggests, his writing must somehow overcome a culture of panoramas, photographs, and “printed and bound” books of poetry.

While Whitman’s dialogue with the market’s representations relies on a free-verse poetics, my project interrogates the work of two antebellum storytellers because I want to understand how the formal practices of romantic fiction relied upon narrative innovation to philosophically exploit the instability of the line between truth and fiction at a particu-
lar moment in time. Both theorists of the novel and critics of particular novelistic traditions have long recognized the dependence of fictional storytelling on the assumptions, postures, and conventions of information culture. Critics of the early English novel, for example, have shown how the novel invoked the contingent authority of journalism to carve out its unique cultural cachet. As Lennard Davis’s account of the early English novel reminds us, the grand categories of literary taxonomy—fact/fiction, prose/poetry, printed/unprinted—are both subjective and subject to historical and cultural flux. My claim, then, is not that the antebellum era was the first moment in which fiction relied on the market-oriented nature of newspaper writing to articulate its own distinct literariness, for my own exploration of how antebellum information culture shaped the romantic imagination builds on Davis’s great lesson that the novel can only be defined by its “unique and characteristic attitude toward fact and fiction, toward external reality and the nature of their own authenticity, and toward previous literary forms.” Rather than suggesting that the romance exhibits an unprecedented literary reliance on journalistic truth claims, I argue that the romantic storyteller was theorizing about the cultural fiction of authenticity because during these decades such a theoretical project promised these writers a critical (and mythical) distance from what Jonathan Elmer calls “the figure of the mass,” an imaginary collective being that Elmer tells us is “posed over and against the self.” And so when we read the romance as an answer to the narrative practices of early mass culture, we see the romancer as a fragile discursive invention, a rhetorical being who must continually invoke and reject the economic roles of producer and consumer.

Perhaps more than anything else, it is this rhetorical distance from market practice that distinguishes Hawthorne and Melville from another canonical author of the American Renaissance, Edgar Allan Poe. As Terence Whalen has illustrated in his trenchant analysis of Poe’s market-savviness, Poe invented literary forms such as the newspaper hoax and the detective tale that sought to capitalize on popular literary and journalistic practices. Much like a patron of Barnum’s museum, a reader of Poe’s “Balloon-Hoax” experienced the slipperiness of the question of authenticity as it functioned in the antebellum marketplace—and as Poe’s reader negotiated the line between truth and humbug, his innovative fictions would cash in (however modestly) on such a cultural practice. As I have already suggested, the two authors at the heart of my study devised literary forms that obsessively opposed, even confronted the economic exploitation of the question of authenticity. Thus, as we consider an early murder mystery tale of Hawthorne’s, we will see how the tale’s idiosyncratic
narrative structure resisted the kind of closure that defined not only penny press journalism but also the tales of ratiocination that Poe would write a decade later. And so between Poe on the one hand and Hawthorne and Melville on the other, we have essentially two opposing kinds of exploitation: Poe’s narrative innovations refine the logic of Barnum and Bennett without entirely rejecting the premise of salesmanship, while those of Hawthorne and Melville (though no less dependent on the contexts of mass culture) posit themselves, and imagine their authors, as the antithesis of such commercialism.

To further illustrate the romantic nature of Hawthorne’s and Melville’s relationship to the surfaces of antebellum culture, we can also consider the authorial self-invention carried out in one of the more popular novels of the 1850s, Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*. At the time that *Ruth Hall* appeared in 1855, Fanny Fern was a successful and well-known newspaper columnist—or, rather, Fern was the well-known alias of the writer Sara Payson Willis. The story of *Ruth Hall* traces the rise to prominence of the titular heroine (who writes under the pen name “Floy”), a character clearly based on Willis’s own transformation into “Fanny Fern.” After Ruth’s husband dies, leaving her financially insecure with two young daughters, she comes face-to-face with the economic vagaries and political corruption of New York journalism. Over the course of the novel, Ruth comes to learn her economic value in the violent, sexist, and unpredictable marketplace—so that her emergence as “Floy” is directly linked to her achievement of economic independence and security. Less concerned with probing into the true nature of reality than with negotiating the arbitrary values of a world of surfaces, Fern embraces a model of identity that sees the self as a public construction unavoidably (and untragically) dependent on the terms that culture provides. As Michael Gilmore writes, Fern, like her fictional counterpart, “had become her public persona, and the only thing that existed behind her assumed identity was . . . her assumed identity as Fanny Fern.”

One antebellum commentator who was both impressed and taken aback at Fern’s novel was Hawthorne, who wrote to his publisher, “The woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are only distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were—then their books are sure to possess character and value.” Hawthorne’s rhetorical embrace of Fern’s self-exposure is fascinating in part because, as I have just suggested, the novel is almost entirely preoccupied with the construction of
its protagonist’s public self. And yet, as Hawthorne’s letter suggests, it was Fern’s willingness to share vivid details of her private life that fueled its popularity: as Michael Gilmore notes, “the antebellum public scooped up the book because it told curious readers everything they could ever want to know about its celebrity author” (77).

Tellingly, though Hawthorne claims to admire the starkness of Fern’s self-revelation, his own “Custom-House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter* is far more interested in opposing the romantic author’s “inmost Me” from his “figurative self”—that is, he carefully distinguishes between the genuine humanity beyond the reach of the reader’s gaze and the minor celebrity whose exploits as the recently deposed customs inspector were “careering” through the press. As I suggest in chapter 3, by depicting himself as “decapitated” by the sensationalistic journalistic coverage of his politically motivated dismissal, Hawthorne locates his own literary artistry in a realm of romantic selfhood that the scandal-mongers can never reach. As in his earlier short fiction, the logic of romance as a storytelling ideal functions in his preface as a way of inoculating the artist against the empty commercialism that pervades the penny papers, the custom house, and antebellum society in general. Ultimately, then, the “stark” nakedness he praises in Fern’s novel is a distinctly gendered literary ideal, one that, in assigning the goal of self-revelation to the female writer, reserves for the male author the romantic ideal of self-preservation.

In portraying the romance as a genre that eschews the surfaces of American culture for a more philosophical interrogation of the nature of reality, I am corroborating a long-standing critical account of both Hawthorne and Melville as deeply theoretical writers. For well over half a century, literary critics have tended to define the fiction of these authors by its attention to what Lionel Trilling called “the problem of reality.” In “Reality in America” (1940), Trilling attacks the critical approach taken by V. L. Parrington to American literature, stating that Parrington’s “errors are the errors of understanding which arise from his understanding about the nature of reality.” To Parrington, “there exists . . . a thing called reality; it is one and immutable, it is wholly external, it is irreducible.” Against such a view, Trilling argues in “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” (1947) that the goal of the novel has always been “to try to penetrate to the truth which, as the novel assumes, lies hidden beneath all the false appearances.” Though Trilling bemoans the fact that American romancers like Hawthorne and Melville have “not turned their minds to society,” diverging too often from “the problem of reality beginning in the social field” and moving toward the airier concerns of romanticism, he nonetheless suggests that these authors understood reality as a problem, as something that is never
perfectly known in any objective way, never adequately contained or represented. While Parrington’s Hawthorne is “forever dealing with shadows” and therefore never able to “establish contact with the Yankee reality,” Trilling’s Hawthorne is most in touch with reality at the very moments when he struggles to find it: “The man who could raise those brilliant and serious doubts about the nature and possibility of moral perfection, the man who could keep himself aloof from the Yankee reality and who could dissent from the orthodoxies of dissent and tell us so much about the nature of moral zeal, is of course dealing exactly with reality.”

Writing after Trilling, in a landmark account of the contrast between the novel and the romance in the United States, one that has defined the terms for a half-century of critical debate, Richard Chase famously described the latter as a “broken circuit,” a distinctly American genre that eschews the quest for unity found in European novels in favor of depicting the “anomalies and disorders” of the American experience. Echoing the terms of Trilling, Chase argues that the novel and the romance differ “in the way in which they view reality.” Hawthorne, Melville, and other writers of romance, Chase suggests, are defined by their privileged and nuanced understanding of the deeper realities that lurk far beneath the mere surfaces of American culture. Throughout the numerous disagreements and controversies that have followed in the wake of Chase’s account, the problem of reality has survived as a way of talking about the philosophical project of romantic fiction. Over the past several decades, Michael Davitt Bell has defined the romance by its “sacrifice of relation,” its “fear of the artifice and insincerity of forms”; Evan Carton has described it as “a specific and urgent kind of rhetorical performance, a self-consciously dialectical enactment of critical and philosophical concerns about the relation of words to things and the nature of the self”; Walter Benn Michaels has suggested that “the romance represents nothing” as a way of recasting “representations [as] unrealities produced by mirrors”; Emily Miller Budick has argued that the romance exhibits a “double consciousness of interpretive processes” and an “awareness of the unknowability of material reality”; G. R. Thompson and Eric Carl Link have described the romance’s “almost obsessive concern for experimental form, linguistic play, indeterminism, and self-reflexivity”; and Peter J. Bellis has written that “the romance’s historical and rhetorical self-consciousness works . . . to resist co-optation by any hegemonic discourse or totalizing representation.” While these scholars disagree about the nature of romance—and while many scholars continue to read Chase’s “romance thesis” as a function of mid-twentieth-century “cold war consensus-making”—these and many other readers define the fiction of Hawthorne and Melville by its philosophical stance.
regarding the capacity of language and storytelling to access and lend meaning to reality.

As new historical modes of reading romantic fiction have predominated in recent decades, critics have often interpreted the romance’s theoretical dimensions as a language of social critique and (symbolic) political action. Indeed, perhaps more than any other writers of the so-called American Renaissance, Hawthorne and Melville are often celebrated by late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholars for their insightfulness as social and cultural critics. While important readings of romantic fiction have exposed the sexist implications of Hawthorne’s sense of authorship and the imperialist assumptions of Melville’s literary imagination, just as often the new historicist sees the romancer as, well, a new historicist—a reform-minded analyst whose deconstruction of cultural facades was civic-minded and progressive. In the case of Melville, a text such as *Typee* “destabilizes our very processes of understanding ‘other’ people,” while “*Benito Cereno*” exposes “sentimental modes of reading and response” to be “civic maladies” that threaten the integrity of the American republic. Hawthorne, similarly, “wanted his readers to consider how barbarism took the form of ‘culture’—not only as cultural ‘documents,’ but as structures of daily life, customs, premises.” And so the same writer who was once seen as the archetypal “citizen of somewhere else” is now routinely held up as “a cultural analyst of extraordinary acuity, ambitious . . . to reshape—in a sense, to cure—the community he addresses.”

Such a scholarly view seems grounded in part in the way romantic fiction echoes new historicism’s own sense of reality as a category constantly being shaped by social, economic, and psychological conditions. Consider, for example, Millicent Bell’s introductory essay to *Hawthorne and the Real*, a recent volume marking the bicentennial of Hawthorne’s birth in which several important scholars reexamine the question of the romancer’s relationship to history. In a thought-provoking essay, Bell verbalizes a longstanding assumption, held by countless readers of both Hawthorne’s and Melville’s fiction, that the romancer’s theoretical perspective was both forward-thinking and miraculous: “Somehow [Hawthorne] foresaw a ‘postmodern’ way of thinking that ‘reality’ is a word always to be set in quotation marks as a part of the mind’s figuration . . . . Hawthorne himself sometimes seems to make an ironic mockery of our search for stable meanings.” For Bell, as for many critics before her, “Hawthorne’s notorious cultivation of ambiguity in his stories seems to mean that he, like ourselves, longed vainly for the classic realist’s confidence in the singularity and accessibility of meaning . . . the solidity of a world which is not undermined by doubt of our perceptions. But his fiction does not
grant to our perceptions an indissoluble bond with unquestionable reality” (19–20).

While my own study upholds Bell’s claim, its greater aim is to reveal that this romantic embrace of ambiguity was also a means of protecting reality from the masses—a reading of my authors that is somewhat out of step with contemporary critical practice. Because new historical treatments of Hawthorne and Melville aim, often explicitly, to correct the earlier views of these writers as disconnected from place and time, each author now regularly (though by no means always) appears as the antithesis of the “citizen of somewhere else”—that is, as the engaged and well-intentioned citizen of the American republic. But, of course, to historicize romanticism one need not deny the romantic flight from society as a powerful and consequential drive. After all, in some of the most rigorous and influential readings of canonical antebellum fiction (those by Walter Benn Michaels, Myra Jehlen, Wai Chee Dimock, and Sacvan Bercovitch, to name just a few) the historically minded critic takes as a subject the romantic imagination’s impossible quest for a space outside of ideology, a space beyond history. For when we attend to the rhetorical dimensions of the romancer’s theoretical beliefs, Hawthorne’s and Melville’s shared sense of “reality” as a word to be placed in scare quotes seems less a vehicle of social critique than a language for imagining and communicating a self beyond the threat of collective identity-making.43

Consider the following excerpt from a letter that Melville wrote to his brother, in which he announces the birth of his son, Malcolm:

He’s a perfect prodigy.—If the worst comes to the worst, I shall let him out by the month to Barnum; and take the tour of Europe with him. I think of calling him Barbarossa—Adolphus—Ferdinand—Otho—Grandissimo Hercules—Sampson—Bonaparte—Lambert. . . . There was a terrible commotion here at the time of the event.—I had men stationed at all the church bells, 24 hours before hand; & when the Electric Telegraph informed them of the fact—such a ding-donging you never heard. . . . Of course the news was sent on by telegraph to Washington & New Orleans.—When Old Zack heard of it—he is reported to have said—“Mark me: that boy will be President of the United States before he dies”—In New Orleans, the excitement was prodigious. Stocks rose & brandy fell.—I have not yet heard from Europe and Pekin. But doubtless, ere this, they must have placed props against the Great-Wall.—The harbor here is empty.—all the ships, brigs, schooners & smacks having scattered in all directions with the news for foreign parts.—The crowd has not yet left the streets, gossiping of the event.44
In linking the telegraph with the humbuggery of P. T. Barnum, money-hungry speculators, and the gossiping masses, Melville’s letter mocks the commingling of information, entertainment, and capitalism that characterized antebellum culture. But if the twenty-first-century reader might celebrate Melville’s awareness of the cultural fictions of a modernizing America, the above passage also suggests the extent to which this culture had successfully infiltrated the romantic mind. As Melville writes beyond the gaze of the public’s eye, the symbols of mass culture have been so internalized within the author’s consciousness, so woven into his very sense of what is real, that the significance of his son’s birth can only be communicated by recasting Morse’s technology and Barnum’s humbugs as ironic symbols of his own joy; Melville’s identity as a new father here can only be verbalized by invoking the unreal world of commerce, spectacle, and gossip in which the unseen masses live.

Just as these symbols of antebellum information culture continually appear in the romantic consciousness, so, too, does the subtle cultural logic that obsessively sees the world through the categories of truth and humbug. In the love letters that Hawthorne wrote to Sophia Peabody in the months and years leading up to and following their marriage in July 1842, for example, we see the author’s ongoing struggle to find a refuge from the threat of collective identity. The Nathaniel and Sophia of these letters reside (with the literary geniuses of “Hawthorne and His Mosses”) in a rhetorical space that exists outside the “unreal” world in which others live, work, and gossip. In September of 1841, the author writes to his fiancée, “If it were not for my Dove, this present world would see no more of me forever. . . . Once in a while, people might discern my figure gliding stealthily through the dim evening—that would be all. I should be only a shadow of the night; it is thou that givest me reality, and makest all things real for me.” Later in the same letter, Hawthorne describes his time at Brook Farm, the Utopian community from which he was temporarily away at the time of writing:

I should judge it to be twenty years since I left Brook Farm; and I take this to be one proof that my life there was an unnatural and unsuitable, and therefore an unreal one. It already looks like a dream behind me. The real me was never an associate of the community; there has been a spectral Appearance there, sounding the horn at day-break, and milking the cows, and hoeing potatoes, and raking hay, toiling and sweating in the sun, and doing me the honor to assume my name. But be not thou deceived, Dove of my heart. This Spectre was not thy husband. Nevertheless, it is somewhat remarkable that thy husband’s hands have, during this past
summer, grown very brown and rough; insomuch that many people persist in believing that he, after all, was the aforesaid spectral horn-sounder, cow-milker, potatoe-hoer, and hay-raker. But such a people do not know a reality from shadow. (566)

Here we see Hawthorne move from describing the unsuitability of the environment of Brook Farm to defining such an environment as “unreal”—so that the language of reality emerges as a way for the author to evade the “spectral” identities (“horn-sounder, cow-milker, potatoe-hoer, and hay-raker”) Brook Farm threatens to impose upon him. More than merely a philosophical category, the word “reality” allows the author to contrast the integrity of his own identity with the marketplace’s superficial view of the individual as simply a source of labor.

The passage is typical of Hawthorne’s private writing in its distinguishing between the “reality” in which others live and the deeper, more genuine reality that only the two lovers have access to. In other words, “reality” seems to function in Hawthorne’s imagination as a signifier that carries with it a powerful distinction between romantic integrity and an imagined mass of humanity that dwells amid inauthenticity. Another letter from October of 1841, for example, claims that until “the heart is touched” Nathaniel and Sophia “are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest substance of a dream. . . . That touch creates us—then we begin to be—thereby we are beings of reality, and inheritors of eternity.” And in yet another correspondence, Nathaniel tells Sophia, “Thou art my only reality—all other people are shadows to me; all events and actions, in which thou dost not mingle, are but dreams.” Similarly, in describing the blissful summer of 1842 the author and his new wife spent at the Old Manse, Hawthorne wrote in his notebook that “it might be a sin and shame, in such a world as ours, to spend a lifetime in this manner; but, for a few summer-weeks, it is good to live as if this world were Heaven. And so it is, and so it shall be; although, in a little while, a flitting shadow of earthly care and toil will mingle itself with our realities.” In Hawthorne’s mind, he and Sophia lived in a reality that offset the shadows of the outside world; for even when his bride suffered a miscarriage early the next year, Hawthorne would write that the grief did not “penetrate to the reality of our life. We do not feel as if our promised child were taken from us forever; but only as if his coming has been delayed for a season” (American Notebooks 366).

While Hawthorne’s letters seem merely to epitomize the platonic language of romantic love, a realm from which two lovers look down on the world of shadows in metaphysical union, we must recall that the unreal
world to which his love letters refer was always a historically specific place defined by the always-loomining (and often united) threats of commerce and collective identity. After all, many of the letters to Sophia were written in settings that the author associated with the drudgeries of labor—the Boston custom house where he worked as a measurer for most of 1839 and 1840; Brook Farm; and the Salem “chamber” in which he wrote much of his early fiction. Writing by moonlight to Sophia about his days in the custom house, for example, Hawthorne defines his very humanity against the sort of work he performs during daylight hours: “Now, my intellect, and my heart and soul, have no share in my present mode of life—they find neither labor nor food in it; every thing I do here might better be done by a machine. I am a machine, and am surrounded by hundreds of similar machines;—or rather, all of the business people are so many wheels of one great machine—and we have no more love or sympathy for one another than if we were made of wood, brass, or iron, like the wheels of other pieces of complicated machinery.” If the deeper, more genuine “reality” to which his letters refer was thus a language for resisting the identity forced upon Hawthorne by the particular social and economic contexts in which he lived and wrote, it should not suffice to theorize that Hawthornean reality merely provided a forum in which to resist and critique the cold commerce of New England life. Rather, the above critique of the Brook Farm project suggests that Hawthorne’s dependence on the language of reality was ontological—in that it offered the romantic mind a model of being apart from the logic of community that Brook Farm shared not only with other reform movements but also with what he considered the “one great machine” of American capitalist culture. By recasting the world of social intercourse, gossip, labor, political reform, and economic exchange as an unreality, Hawthorne could exist apart from any political party, reform movement, or social class, and beyond the shaping logic of mass identity.

In much the same way, the 1844 dream account from Hawthorne’s notebook relies on the implied context of corrupt information to foreground the artist’s capacity to see through the lies that define “the world” as a collective presence. And so it is no doubt significant that Hawthorne had his dream within months of one of the most consequential events of the nineteenth century: the May 1844 installation of Samuel Morse’s electromagnetic telegraph, a moment that transformed the typical American’s conception of reality. Although Morse’s technology was initially seen as a supernatural curiosity, in the wake of its successful installation it quickly came to symbolize the promise of an instantaneous and unmediated link to distant places and events. “Professor Morse’s is not only an era in the
transmission of intelligence,” the Albany Weekly Herald wrote, “but it has originated in the mind an entirely new class of ideas, a new species of consciousness. Never before was any one conscious that he knew with certainty what events were at that moment passing in a distant city—40, 100, or 500 miles off.”\textsuperscript{50} As we shall see, American commentators suddenly were able to imagine the entire nation sitting around an imaginary table, in a realm of informational purity and linguistic transparency. When considered in such a context, Hawthorne’s recording of his dream positions the romantic author as a gatekeeper of reality, maintaining a firm hold on the criteria of truth-telling in the face of a potentially democratizing technology. At the same time, however, Hawthorne’s description of his dream appears to co-opt the telegraphic ideal: as a truth-teller for hire, Hawthorne writes, he will “relate things of public importance exactly as they happen.” Like the myriad paeans to Morse’s “miraculous” invention that appeared in 1844 and soon after, the final four words of Hawthorne’s notebook entry quietly merge objective reliability and simultaneity, reimagining these telegraphic ideals as the shared criteria of perfect communication and romantic integrity.

All of these moments—Hawthorne’s letters to Sophia, his dream, Melville’s invocation of a foundational “axis of reality,” his announcement of Malcolm’s birth—rail against inauthenticity to invoke the imagined figure of the mass as the foil of the romantic self. In the following chapters, I develop this argument by approaching the deconstructive worldview of romance as both historical (shaped by particular discursive and material contexts) and rhetorical (employed by its practitioners as a means of negotiating such contexts). Perhaps, in privileging the romance as a meaningful and distinct category of American literary writing, and in upholding what has recently been called the “hoary notion” of romance as a form of escapism, my treatment of these authors seems like a return to the long-abandoned premises that shaped Americanist scholarship in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.\textsuperscript{51} In fact, what I hope these chapters offer is not a return to an earlier way of reading but an account of the romantic flight from contingency that has been informed by the insights and priorities of new historicism, a reading of antebellum literature and culture that sees the romancer’s desire for a different kind of reality as a dream that was firmly grounded in place and time.