Around a decade ago, my teaching of America’s nineteenth-century “cultures of letters” (the phrase is the title of a superb book by Richard Brodhead) led me to notice some similarities in the writerly lives of Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson. For instance, each writer refused a mentor’s request for a photograph, each writer grew up in a family that had suffered significant financial reversals, each spent a major part of her or his creative life in western Massachusetts, and each suffered with eye ailments. These apparently superficial similarities took on more significance when I began to consider how conflicted was each writer’s relationship to those cultures (and in fact to recognize that there were indeed cultures, that there was not a single “scene of writing”—Brodhead’s phrase—within which they worked) and how dramatically distant the two seemed from each other in scholarly studies. In fact, any serious work that included one of these writers seemed to ignore the existence of the other, almost as if they occupied distinct but parallel universes.

To a cursory glance, of course, they did: female versus male, private writer versus public author, unmarried versus married, stay-at-home versus world traveler, writing as an avocation versus writing as a profession, poet versus novelist, and so forth. But as I continued to think about and explore the similarities, I began to realize that the differences separating the two writers might be to an extent a vestige of earlier approaches to American literary history, in which male authors were studied as public voices, and in which scholars whose work went beyond concentrating on a single writer would emphasize either one genre (Chase’s The American Novel and Its
Tradition, The Continuity of American Poetry by Pearce) or one theme (Levin’s The Power of Blackness, Feidelson’s Symbolism and American Literature). Even the groundbreaking work that began to incorporate what had been considered the “low” or “popular” culture of nineteenth-century America (such as Cultures of Letters, Reynolds’s Beneath the American Renaissance, Walker’s The Nightingale’s Burden, Petrino’s Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries) typically would not cross more than one of those universe boundaries. For these reasons, the dramatic differences between Melville and Dickinson made the similarities all the more interesting to me.

As Brodhead shows, the economics of writing, the labor of writing, the relationships between writers and readers, and the stratification by genre all became well established during the decades immediately after the Civil War. I began to realize that the picture was even more complicated in the case of writers whose interest lay outside of print publication. To tease out these contradictions, I turned to the work of the French sociologist of literature Pierre Bourdieu and of his chief American exponent John Guillory, applying their analyses to the noncommercial markets that interested Melville and Dickinson, markets within which circulated such genres as portfolio poetry, the commonplace book, the scrap book, the personal letter, and the self-published limited-print-run book. During this period all of these genres, and others, operated within markets that created and circulated symbolic capital but had almost nothing to do with the production of economic capital (aside from the production of the paper, copy books, and empty scrap books that constituted the raw physical material of the genres). Yet these extra-economic markets were significantly influenced by the dominant economic markets: “The conjunction of mass literacy and fully reproducible text made print the most advanced medium of marketed and marketable culture and thus made literature a leading early instance of an autonomous aesthetic field whose construction was both opposed to and facilitated by that impersonal and heteronomous cultural market” (Paulson 403).

Decades ago William Charvat noted that to create literature in the middle of the nineteenth century was to seek to establish one’s authority both in conjunction with and in opposition to a market driven by the economics of large-scale production and consumption. According to Charvat, the writers of this era were always struggling with two opposing pressures, “creative and social,” with the latter understood to include the economic aspects of copyright, printing, and distribution (297). In fact Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret can be understood as an application and elaboration of Charvat’s key point that such economics is “ancillary—and subordinate to—the historical study of . . . cultural dynamics” (297). I
would only disagree with Charvat that “literary economics” lacks relevance for the study of “non-professional writers like Thoreau, Whitman, and Emily Dickinson.” As Bourdieu has shown with his extensive statistical analyses of the business of French culture—and perhaps as Charvat understood but was too cautious to assert—these dynamics are grounded in various types of capital. Bourdieu explains that understanding how a writer responds to the available fields and markets requires describing “the space of available possibilities (in particular, the economic and symbolic hierarchy of the genres, schools, styles, manners, subjects, etc.), the social value attached to each of them, and also the meaning and value they received for the different agents or classes of agents in terms of the socially constituted categories of perception and appreciation they applied to them” (*Field* 89–90). The value of a work of art is produced not or not only by the artist but also by “the field of production as a universe of belief” that includes “belief in the creative power of the artist” (Bourdieu, *Rules of Art* 229).

*Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret* lays out these spaces for two of America’s major nineteenth-century authors, demonstrating that each can be understood as negotiating between the romantic notion of the individual genius composing in solitude with no concern for an audience (writing in the garret) and the writer whose only interest is to earn money by pleasing a mass audience (writing for the street). Melville himself voiced this opposition in a quatrain titled “In a Garret” from his late volume *Timoleon*: “Gems and jewels let them heap—/ Wax sumptuous as the Sophi:/ For me, to grapple from Art’s deep / One dripping trophy!” (*Collected Poems* 228). I adopt the metaphors “street” and “garret” as one way to avoid “the dubiously dichotomizing terms ‘elite’ (serious) and ‘mass’ (popular) culture” (Davidson 17) while still acknowledging the salience of those concepts for the writers themselves and for their actual audiences. Much can be learned by looking at both Melville and Dickinson as seeking a middle way between street and garret: aiming overtly (or, in the case of Melville, desiring to aim) for actual albeit extremely small audiences (perhaps only a single reader) in order to earn symbolic capital (prestige) which could then enhance the author’s authority as a cultural spokesperson and critic.

I also emphasize that the two must be thought of specifically as writers. The garret was not just a metaphor for evoking a romanticized notion of the suffering artist unappreciated by her or his generation; it also metonymically invoked the physiological wear and tear caused by the physical work of putting pen to paper. Writing is not roofing or bricklaying, but it has always carried a set of occupational hazards that manifest themselves
in headaches, eye strain, and back and leg pains (especially sciatica), not to mention a general weariness that can result from sitting at a table in an icy room eight hours a day (as Melville did during much of the composition of *Moby-Dick*). A writer’s choices regarding implement and paper, chair and desk, lighting, time of day, length of time spent writing, use of a scribe or reader, use of other books—all of these influence the writer’s goals and successes.

Writing is easier now, physically, than it was for Melville and Dickinson. I don’t have to strain to write by whale-oil lamp or kerosene lantern; central heating and an electric blanket compensate for my poor circulation; I don’t have to pay someone to transcribe my handwriting into a legible text for an editor to consider. Moreover, while I have done much of the writing in garret-like isolation, I have benefited from an NEH Summer Stipend, a Faculty Creative Work and Research Award from the University of Southern Indiana, the encouragement of colleagues in the Emily Dickinson International Society (Ellen Louise Hart, Paul Crumbley, Barbara Kelley, Cindy Mackenzie, and Ellie Heginbotham, especially), and the intellectual stimulation provided by one of the best students from which a teacher could ever learn, Craig T. Fehrman.

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