Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret

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So far I have concentrated on the economic and aesthetic components of the literary culture within which Dickinson and Melville wrote. I have shown that they attempted or at least desired to operate outside of the capitalist and mimetic markets (especially opposing advertising), that they desired to publish in ways that preserved their total control over and ownership of their work, and that they accepted the romantic notion that individual authorial authority was grounded in imagination and inspiration. Another context is also important: how their era recognized the human mind as both material and immaterial but gave more weight to the latter. Dickinson’s and Melville’s representations of the mind and its relationship to the writing hand and the written text reflect their era’s root metaphor of the mind as a physical entity. This metaphor informed their interest in (and Dickinson’s commitment to) the hand-produced text and contributed to the impact of their eye problems and other ailments. It also bears on how each writer actually put words on paper. Neither writer’s composing habits are well documented, and much critical discussion is based on inference, guesswork, or current attitudes toward textuality and authority. Of Dickinson, Habegger cautions that “we know almost nothing about the daily originating matrix of the writer’s work. . . . We have . . . no authorial memoirs telling us how the writing connected with the events of life . . . it often happens that the poems that speak of the most vital of private experiences were preserved in the manuscript books only, giving us virtually no context” (405). The same caution, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to Melville.
Nevertheless, we do have some knowledge about how each writer put words on paper, knowledge that is based on texts they generated (manuscripts, letters, page proofs), on their own statements, and on what was said about them by family members and friends. (These latter two categories of information must always be used with caution.) Melville began his career by following the journalistic model: writing quickly, emphasizing impressions and information, and expecting to connect with his audience in a fairly ephemeral way. He wrote in pencil; this fact, coupled with his poor handwriting, meant that he needed someone else to prepare fair copies for the printer. (When he shipped out on his first voyage, in 1839, his name was mistakenly entered as Norman Melville, “probably as a consequence of his unimproved penmanship”—Delbanco 28.) These copies he punctuated himself. Once he began attempting to make a career out of writing, he treated himself as if he were involved in manual labor. His father-in-law wrote on 1 September 1856 that Herman had been “very ill” and that, according to Elizabeth, “When he is deeply engaged in one of his literary works, he confines him to hard study many hours in the day,—with little or no exercise, & this especially in winter for a great many days together. He probably thus overworks himself & brings on severe nervous affections” (quoted by Parker, Herman Melville 2:289). This had been his practice at least since he began Moby-Dick six years earlier—to treat writing as a different sort of “trying out,” with no rest until the last scrap of blubber was rendered into oil. There was some respite: occasionally, after a day of writing, he might read his work aloud to members of his household, although the reports of this practice do not indicate that he expected or solicited any critical response. Perhaps he hoped for a scene of performance like those he had enjoyed as a young man, regaling his fellow sailors with his “fine yarns” and similarly “enthralling” his bride-to-be (Parker, Herman Melville 1:220, 264–65, 311). A final and extremely important practice was relying heavily on other works such as published books and articles, magazine illustrations, and his own journals, something he did throughout his writing career. These were Melville’s practices, somewhat modified as his living and financial situations changed, for a writing career lasting more than forty years.

During his twelve years at Arrowhead (from the completion of Moby-Dick through The Confidence-Man to the lost Poems and after), he used a large writing table. The table now in that room may have been the one at which he composed Moby-Dick, but has not been proved to be so; however, it is certainly large enough to contain a substantial collection of books and still afford plenty of room to write. (See figure 7.)

Diminutive Emily Dickinson used a tiny writing table in her bedroom
Figure 7. Period table in Herman Melville’s study at Arrowhead. Used by permission of the Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

Figure 8. Emily Dickinson’s writing table. Dickinson family artifacts collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Used by permission.
at the family “homestead”—at least, we assume that this was where she actually put many of her words on paper, and scholars are certain that the table now in the collection at Harvard’s Houghton Library was indeed Dickinson’s own. (See figure 8.) Another intriguing element of her physical environment was the “Centre Burying Ground” of Amherst (now referred to as the “West Cemetery”), with its imposing new “Town Tomb” that had been constructed in 1850–51. Before the family returned to the Homestead in 1855, they spent fifteen years on North Pleasant Street, directly across from the Centre Burying Ground. Figure 9 gives a sense of what Emily saw out of her second-floor bedroom window—the quite imposing Town Tomb, not more than about eighty yards distant. Figure 10 suggests the scale of this structure, the young woman in the photograph being, at five feet tall, slightly taller than Emily.

This tomb was a very different “swelling of the ground” than Mount Greylock, which Melville could see from his study window (see figure 11), but it is equally suggestive. Dickinson quite possibly valued that cemetery view in the same way that Melville was influenced by the whalclike shape of Greylock. (Wolff points out that the touring of cemeteries was a common practice in New England and that in 1846 Dickinson had visited and commented on the Mount Auburn cemetery in Boston.)

Fruitful as it can be to compare the (stereotypical) novelist’s large table with the (stereotypical) poet’s tiny table, the man’s expansive view with the woman’s view of ultimate constraint, we actually know even less about how Dickinson put words to paper than we do about how Melville did so. I will discuss her fascicles in a later section of this chapter; it suffices here to note the standard view of her composing process: earlier in her writing career she wrote initial drafts of her poems in pencil and made fair copies in ink on high-quality paper, which she then bound into booklets; she apparently regarded those fair copies as still under revision because they show variants. Later she ceased to make fair copies and tended to compose drafts in pencil on scraps of paper. Like many people of her era who conducted extensive correspondence, she took letter writing seriously, first drafting and then making fair copies. Marta Werner’s description of Dickinson’s composing and drafting process, as inferred from the textual evidence, exemplifies this view:

In Dickinson’s work two broad scriptural “styles,” two hands—one for rough copy drafts, another for fair copy drafts—reflect and translate into space two interior movements of the mind. . . . The style for rough copy drafts, which remained constant even throughout the late years, is also the style of the dictation—a way of writing in speaking: the hand jolts into
Figure 9. The Amherst Town Tomb from the approximate location of the Dickinson family’s house on North Pleasant Street. Photo by Candace and Craig Fehrman. Used by permission.
Figure 10. Close-up view of the Amherst Town Tomb. Photo by Candace and Craig Fehrman. Used by permission.
action. . . . Executed quickly—it is possible to imagine involuntarily—these drafts or inscriptions in which she fixed the nuclei of still unwritten poems reveal the rhapsodic quickenings of thought before their coalescence into a “work.” . . . The cometary pace of her thought determines her choice of materials—whatever lies close by—and is registered in the disturbance of the scribal hand: the script is small and angular, text is superimposed over text, fault lines interrupt the narrative, and, all along the margins, words and solitary letters appear sideways and upside down. (Open Folios 21; emphasis in original)

Like the assessments of Melville’s composing process, those of Dickinson’s reflect our contemporary notions of how texts get produced. A novel, we tend to assume, requires long stretches of writing that may feel laborious. Because novels typically are grounded in a quotidian reality, it is not surprising that a writer will rely on sources or even that a writer needs considerable physical space—a large desk or table—for the work. Lyric poems, on the other hand, reflect “quickenings of thought,” direct dictations from the imagination to the hand. Both genres begin with the production of written (or typed) text that then must be revised.

These general points about the composing processes of Melville and Dickinson, as well as the assumptions about composing in general, will be contextualized and expanded in the following sections, in which I discuss
the cultural basis for the mind/brain metonymy expressed by Dickinson and Melville as well as their conceptions of writing as a craft, in order further to explain their commitment to publishing outside of the commodity-oriented literary marketplace. I will also apply some general points from the field of composition studies to the conventional description of each writer’s process. Any reading of the writers’ metaphors and of the stereotypes they were challenging must be tempered with an awareness of how writers have always worked, in order to avoid interpreting every element of a writer’s process as signifying writerly intent or cultural influence. Certainly, the available writing implements, the type of paper, the lighting, the desks and chairs, all had some influence on how they put words on paper, and certainly these material conditions existed within a discourse and an ideology of materiality. But it would be a mistake immediately to apply current theories of the materialist ideology without fully considering the conditions strictly as material constraints and how the two writers consciously located themselves within their era’s ideology as they understood it, according to which a text really was the embodiment of the author’s mind.

**The “Body-Minded Brain” and the Materiality of Writing**

The phrase “body-minded brain,” coined by Antonio Damasio, aptly captures the convergence among a number of biological and linguistic avenues of research. “Thought and its representation in language [are shaped] . . . by the innate and universal physical parameters of our bodies and brains, as we attempt to make sense of and successfully negotiate what surrounds us, in nature and culture” (Crane and Richardson 127). From this perspective, the brain is “the material site where culture and biology meet and shape each other” (131). The extreme formulation of this approach is “the mind is what the brain does.”

This late-twentieth-century development can be traced to the materialist psychology of the middle of the nineteenth century, a psychology that figured the mind/brain relationship as organic rather than as mechanistic, as had the association psychology of the eighteenth century, and that challenged the other prominent model of the era, the idealist, according to which mind and soul have no material basis. Melville ironized the idealist model, which took as a given the “primary harmony of the soul and the universe” in the words of John D. Morell (quoted in Kearns 40). Melville’s writing reflects a psychology that recognizes a “functional and developmental” connection between the mind and the world, rather than
the “divine, harmonious, magnetic” connection described by Emerson and others (Kearns 49). Likewise, Dickinson frequently figured mental phenomena as based in a material reality. For both Dickinson and Melville, physiological responses to phenomena were themselves significant phenomena but should not be interpreted in the idealist manner proposed by Emerson, every natural fact symbolizing a spiritual fact, as he expressed the point in the first two propositions of chapter 4 of *Nature* (*Nature* 13; Kearns 49, n. 11). Thus, each writer’s descriptions of mental phenomena should be understood both metaphorically and metonymically, revealing the writers’ sense of a physical connection among words, thoughts, and sensations.

Certainly, neither writer would have endorsed (although both probably would have been able to appreciate) the theory that the mind is solely a by-product of the brain’s physical processes. Equally certainly, however, both understood the brain as the “material site” where a number of forces “meet” (not just “culture and biology” but also the writer’s personal history, immediate environment, and inspiration), and both understood writing (the process and the product) as another such site. Scholars generally agree that each writer was aware of and probably influenced by Emerson’s theory that words are signs of natural facts, but both seem to have moved beyond that assertion to understand and render words as natural facts no different from “[t]he meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat,” as Emerson wrote (“American Scholar” 50). In line with this understanding, both represented the acts, not just the outcomes, of reading and writing, acts that featured the struggle honestly to render surfaces within a print culture that treated those surfaces as transparent to a submerged meaning but represented authors as the print surfaces to which their names were attached, and within a legal system that seemed designed to limit the author’s role to producing such surfaces while granting to the public the use of the surfaces’ significance.

Fairly early in his writing career, Melville was referring to texts as tangible entities whose content could be tasted, hefted, and otherwise perceived in the same way as any other physical item. Writing to Hawthorne on 29 June 1851, he asked, “Shall I send you a fin of the *Whale* by way of a specimen mouthful? The tail is not yet cooked—though the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled might not unreasonably have cooked it all ere this” (*Correspondence* 196). And responding to a letter from Hawthorne, he wrote on 22 July 1851, “I thank you for your easy-flowing long letter (received yesterday) which flowed through me, and
refreshed all my meadows, as the Housatonic—opposite me—does in reality” (199). A logical extension of this metonymic relationship among a book, its writer, and its reader is Melville’s assertion that a book’s physical appearance should reflect its content. In “A Thought on Book-Binding,” he wrote that “books should be appropriately appareled. Their bindings should indicate and distinguish their various characters”; he thus praised Fenimore Cooper’s The Red Rover for the cover’s “felicitous touch of the sea superstitions of pirates” (237).

Melville understood a writer’s work as involving (but certainly not limited to) physiology. For instance, comparing Hawthorne to Shakespeare, he wrote that the former was “content with the still, rich utterances of a great intellect in repose, and which sends few thoughts into circulation, except they be arterialized at his large warm lungs, and expanded in his honest heart” (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 245). The difference between his description of his own process as “hell-fire” and that of Hawthorne as reposed and “easy-flowing” demonstrates as well that the physiological relationship between text and author depends on the temperament of the author. Melville’s most extensive presentation of this relationship is in Pierre. Settled into his squalid rooms at the Inn of the Apostles, Pierre struggles daily to write but can’t bridge the gap between what he feels or knows and what he can say: “Two books are being writ; of which the world shall only see one, and that the bungled one. The larger book . . . it is, whose unfathomable cravings drink his blood; the other only demands his ink. . . . Thus Pierre is fastened on by two leeches” (304). A second extended figure aptly characterizes how Melville himself almost certainly felt the tangible reality of the to-be-written book: “Still [Pierre’s] book, like a vast lumbering planet, revolves in his aching head. He can not command the thing out of its orbit; fain would he behead himself, to gain one night’s repose” (305).

Similarly, Dickinson often characterized both the production and the reception of writing in terms of physiology. Her best-known comment in this direction is her remark, as reported by Higginson in a letter dated 16 August 1870, that if a book “makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way [sic] I know it. Is there any other way” (Dickinson, Letters 473–74). Her second-known letter to Higginson expresses a similar figure, when she refers to the two editors asking for her “Mind” (Letter of 25 April 1862, Letters 404–5). While this comment reflects Dickinson’s awareness that the literary culture of her time tended to commodify an author’s very self, it also can mean what it literally says—Dickinson felt that the editors wanted to
carry away a piece of her mind by carrying away either a thought or something she had written. In relaying this anecdote, Dickinson intended for Higginson to see that she valued her work, and she may have wanted him to see that others did as well: her choice of metonymy to make the point demonstrates a belief that she was indeed what she wrote.

Dickinson was well aware that readers tended to identify a writer not just with but as the words the writer produced, an identification that was essential for marketing, and participated in the general movement in nineteenth-century America toward commodifying labor, as I have shown in chapter 2. However, her choice of figure should not be read merely as a cultural tic. For the literary marketplace, to equate a writer with her work was a convenience, a shorthand, one we still use: “I have studied Dickinson,” “I love Daniel Silva.” Like every other great poet, Dickinson dove beneath her culture’s casual and intentional figures in order to explore their human truth, in this case a truth about relativism that was slowly becoming accepted or at least known. Immediately following the first letter’s question she observes that “[t]he Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask—.” If producer and product were separate, “weighing” or “distinctly” seeing should pose no problem. In a nonrelativistic universe, one can easily weigh one’s self; whenever we step on a bathroom scale, we imply our faith in that technique of measurement. Dickinson, however, seems to have anticipated Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle here: from a physical and physiological standpoint, the self can’t have objective knowledge about itself because it is implicated in the creation and perception of what it knows. With an entire universe of metaphoric vehicles to draw from, that Dickinson twice in such a short period of time chose vehicles grounded in human physiology suggests that these represented for her a cognitive structure—a way she understood the world—and not just an element of style. This structure is present as late as around 1875: “You cannot take itself / From any Human soul—/ That indestructible estate / Enable him to dwell . . . ” (Fr1359). This poem overtly makes the same point as the first letters to Higginson, that the soul cannot be divided (analyzed, measured). Her goal was probably to stimulate a deeper thought—that certain components of a human’s psyche are susceptible to tangible mechanical operations. Does the soul truly transcend material reality? If so, how do words have the physiological effect they undeniably do have?

For both Melville and Dickinson, reading and writing were two aspects of the same phenomenon: a piece of literature can have a visceral impact on a reader, and the mind is physically embodied in the words one produces. The root metaphor here, mind as a physical entity, is also present
in Dickinson’s poems “The brain is wider than the sky” (Fr598) and “The mind lives on the heart” (Fr1384). Melville dramatizes it in Ishmael’s depiction of masthead dreaming in chapter 35 (“The Mast-Head”) of *Moby-Dick*, a dramatization that also criticizes the idealizing of certain emotions. Ishmael describes a youth on lookout duty who is “lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie . . . that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature,” and his spirit “becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff’s sprinkled pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over” (159). The danger for this youth is that he is suspended over “Descartian vortices”; if he even slightly loosens his hold on his perch he may “drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever” (159). (See Kearns for an extended discussion of this and related passages.)

In short, Melville’s and Dickinson’s body-minded-brain metaphors reflect their sense of how the external world, the writer’s mind, the writer’s body, and the written text could tangibly interact. Melville’s proposal to send Hawthorne “a fin of the *Whale* by way of a specimen mouthful” could be taken simply as a fanciful expression, but it can also be read as reflecting his belief that a text literally embodied its creator’s thoughts and could be consumed physically and mentally. His description of Hawthorne’s “thoughts” as “arterialized at his large warm lungs, and expanded in his honest heart” can be interpreted in the same way. So too can the following frequently anthologized Dickinson poem, probably written during the summer of 1863, a version of which was sent to Susan Dickinson:

I send two Sunsets—
Day and I—in competition—ran—
I finished Two, and several Stars
While He—was making One—
His Own is ampler—but as I
Was saying to a friend—
Mine—is the more convenient—
To carry in the Hand—
(Fr 557)

In chapter 5, I situate this poem in the context of its first publication, according to which “sunsets” refers to the flowers reportedly sent to Susan Dickinson along with the poem. “Stars” might have a similar significance, suggesting perhaps additional flowers, the whole arranged as a colorful
bouquet—either bouquet or single flowers would certainly be “more con-
vienient—/ To carry in the Hand.” Here, I want to consider it strictly
as an individual lyric evoking an idealized relationship between a single,
personalized, ideal speaker and an equally abstract reader. By this read-
ing, “two sunsets” would almost certainly have to refer to the idea of a
sunset conveyed by the poem; as the embodiment of that idea, the poem
is certainly “convenient.” The poem thus asserts a metonymic equivalence
among the actual sunset, the verbal representation, and the idea. The two
readings converge in the poem’s casual, even offhand tone, as if to create a
sunset (whether out of flowers or out of words) were nothing unusual. By
placing the transmission of the poem in the context of a prior conversation
with “a friend,” Dickinson invites not only the specific, intended recipient
of this poem, her sister in-law, but also the “lyric” reader to share the cul-
tural circulation of the concept of metonymy. The convention of climactic
organization implies that the last-mentioned item, the created (floral or
verbal) sunset, is superior. This poem’s metonymic basis is identical to that
of “The mind lives on the heart” and “The brain is wider than the sky”—
for Dickinson, as for Melville, the mental, spiritual, and physical realms
substantially interpenetrated.

Given this overlap, it is not surprising that both Dickinson and Melville
(not to mention the latter’s family) would be troubled by any illness that
could interfere with writing: not to be able to write is to risk the loss of
one’s identity. The eye problems both writers experienced would be most
serious, because the eye reifies the transmission of thought to paper and
guides, quite literally, the addition of new thoughts to those already writ-
ten. The physical activity of writing requires good light—ideally, daylight,
as anyone will attest who has ever tried to read handwriting by candlelight
or oil lamp. While it is possible to write in the dark, most writers find that
in order to hew to a purpose, they must continually reread what they have
written—this is no less true of writers now canonized than for any first-
year college student. Depending on the writer’s rhetorical occasion, the
writer might make (or have someone else make) a fair copy and might be
involved in comparing fair copy with printer’s proofs, activities that don’t
require the author’s eyes but still involve someone’s visual concentration.
No less important is the writer’s collecting of information—by reading
and by looking. Thus, while eyesight is not intrinsically essential for writ-
ing, it may be so for the writer who desires to become an author by going
before an audience, unless that writer leaves the proofing process entirely
to someone else.

As far as we know, at least during his Arrowhead years, Melville used
candles for artificial light, a source that barely sufficed him for reading and
writing. This limitation is clear from a letter he sent to Evert Duyckinck on 13 December 1850: “Before I go further let me say here that I am writing this by candle light—an uncommon thing with me—and therefore my writing wont [sic] be very legible, because I am keeping one eye shut & wink at the paper with the other” (Correspondence 173). A few sentences later he wrote: “My evenings I spend in a sort of mesmeric state in my room—not being able to read—only now & then skimming over some large-printed book” and then immediately made his request for “fifty fast-writing youths” (174). He obviously felt that not being able to work in the evenings was limiting his productivity. In fact, although his second-floor study was fitted with three windows (two facing east, one north), even his daylight hours would not always have been ideal for writing, unless the day were sunny. Dickinson was somewhat better off: during her most productive writing years, the family used kerosene lanterns, which provide a brighter and more consistent light than candles or oil lamps. Thus she would have more easily been able to read and write in the evenings and when daylight was of poor quality.2

The labor of writing also requires a modicum of physical comfort—bearable temperature, a properly configured desk and chair, implements that fit one’s fingers. Less obvious aspects such as nutrition and exercise also play a role. If any of these conditions is lacking, the physical act, already tedious, can damage one’s health, as Melville’s biographers have emphasized and as Dickinson’s have noted (but not emphasized—a telling lapse). Andrew Delbanco concisely lists some of Melville’s illnesses: pain in his eyes while working on Israel Potter in 1854 (209); severe back pain in late 1854 (229); sciatica in June of 1855 that caused him “excruciating, paroxysmal attacks of pain” (261); in 1856 eye strain and a chronic back pain (245); Hawthorne’s statement that his friend “has been affected with neuralgic complaints in his head and limbs, and no doubt has suffered from too constant literary occupation” (252, from Hawthorne’s journal of 20 November 1856). As I mentioned earlier, Melville’s family members frequently worried about the physical demands of his writing, demands that also exacted a psychological toll. His mother, for example, wrote that “[t]he constant in-door confinement with little intermission to which Hermans [sic] occupation as author compels him, does not agree with him. This constant working of the brain, & excitement of the imagination, is wearing Herman out” (letter of April 1853, quoted by Parker, Herman Melville 2:152). According to Parker, Melville’s “account of his writing conditions [at Arrowhead toward the end of 1850] made it sound, for the moment, as near to ideal as he could have hoped” (1:798). The conditions probably were ideal in that Melville had enough time to write, but his
account also sounds somewhat like self-imposed servitude: he sequestered himself in his cold room each morning and remained at work until 2:30 in the afternoon, a regimen that limited him in the evenings to skimming over “some large-printed book.” Anyone who has suffered with sciatica, as did Melville, knows how painful sitting can be; his self-discipline with this condition has to be admired.

Perhaps Parker is correct; at this time in his writing career, especially with the positive distraction and physical labor provided by the Arrowhead farm, Melville was not only healthy but positively disposed toward his chosen profession, but by the mid-1850s his health was a serious worry to his family, who attributed his physical ailments to his writing and who feared as well for his mental health. Melville’s acquaintance Charles Fenno Hoffman had placed himself in an institution in 1849, a fact which troubled Melville’s mother among others. The report on Hoffman’s condition published by Greeley in 1849 echoes the concerns expressed several years later by her and other family members: “C. F. HOFFMAN, whose health had become impaired by too close confinement and incessant application to literary labors, being threatened with a serious affection of the brain, sometime since very judiciously determined to place himself in a position where, with sufficient seclusion, entire avoidance of literary pursuits, and judicious medical treatment, he was likely most speedily and certainly to be restored to his wonted good health” (quoted by Parker, *Herman Melville* 2:153). Greeley’s optimism notwithstanding, Hoffman remained institutionalized until his death in 1884.

Because Melville and Dickinson regarded the written or printed text metonymically as part of themselves, organically and functionally connected in the same way a hand or an eye is connected to the self, then it makes sense that the text could also function as the site of a psychological conflict regarding writing. The body-minded brain figure illuminates what Elizabeth Renker terms Melville’s “tortured relation to his writing” (57). That relation, along with “his chronic association of writing with maddening forms of blockage,” serves to “illuminate a series of textual effects that associate women with blank pages and textual production” (57). “The pasteboard mask that can’t be struck through, the text that can’t be stabbed through, and the copies that he must himself punctuate are dramas of composition in which paper acts as a material site of blockage, frustrating the author’s desire to penetrate and so to transcend material conditions” (67). According to Renker, Melville’s “striking through” is “a materially loaded gesture . . . in terms of his violent frustration with the pages over which he labored and with the laboring women in his household” (68). Renker suggests that he moved from believing that language
could accurately capture and transmit thoughts (when he was writing *Typee* and *Omoo*) to despair over the intransigence of language (represented most dramatically in *Pierre*), thence to a thematization and even celebration of language’s mute surface on which humans project their wishes and beliefs. A final step in this progression might be that he turned away from a focus on language to embrace poetic form during the three decades of his writing life that followed the publication of his prose works; Renker doesn’t argue for this step, but it’s plausible. I suggest a complementary view of Melville’s relationship to the physicality of his writing—that although he may have come to doubt the viability of language as a medium of exchange, so to speak, he never lost his sense of the physical reality of writing as a manifestation of his thoughts—physical as well as linguistic, tangible sign as well as abstract significance.

How healthy Dickinson was, compared to Melville, it is not possible to determine; we can only say that there are fewer references to her being in ill health, but the reasons for that difference could have a great deal to do with her personality, her role in the family, or her gender. We do know, however, that she was afflicted for a time with a serious problem of vision. Habegger writes that the problem began in September 1863; she was treated in Boston “from late April to November 21 in 1864, and again from April 1 to October in 1865” by Dr. Henry Willard Williams (483–84). The diagnosis was probably “anterior uveitis: what used to be called rheumatic iritis” (485). Symptoms were severe and deep-seated pain and intolerance of light; the outlook was positive if the disease was diagnosed and treated in time (485). By late 1865 she seems to have been well enough to skip a scheduled checkup with Dr. Williams, and since she never again referred to the problem, Habegger writes that “there is little basis for suspecting an ongoing, let alone permanent, impairment” (517). Habegger’s tone suggests that although the ailment was serious, it had no permanent effect, and he states that there is no reason to take as an early indication of eye trouble her statement in her second letter to Higginson that she “had a terror” she could not tell anyone about (435), although some biographers have interpreted the letter in that way. Vision problems aside, Dickinson’s health was always a concern, although probably no more than would be expected given her family status or her role as the chief caregiver of her mother and father in their last days.

More important than the longevity or clinical severity of any disease, but especially eye trouble, is what such a condition would do to any person for whom writing was a passion. Because the treatment included avoiding
bright light and above all reading—this avoidance being the only “woe,” she wrote to Joseph Lyman, that ever “made [her] tremble” (quoted by Habegger 484)—it stands to reason that Dickinson was exceedingly troubled by the disease and its consequences: not only could she not read printed matter and letters (one of her primary means of social contact), she could not read her own writing. There is also the possibility that as with Melville some members of her family feared for her sanity or at least that she was aware that some of her behaviors and beliefs invited such a reaction. The poem “Much madness is divinest sense” points in this direction, emphasizing that insanity is defined by “the Majority” and that to “Demur” from the majority view would lead to being termed “dangerous” and “handled with a Chain” (Fr620). These consequences, she writes, are certain; the poem’s sentences are all declarative, with no palliating modals.

BEYOND THE ART OF BOOKCRAFT

Melville and Dickinson were influenced more by the era’s metaphor of an embodied mind than by the opposing and more widely accepted emphasis on the mind as immaterial. Their figurative language reflects that influence, as do Melville’s apparently rough treatment of manuscript and proof copies and Dickinson’s practice of linking letters and poems with physical objects. It would be a mistake, however, to emphasize this influence without giving equal attention to the physical realities of the craft of writing during the decades when Melville and Dickinson were practicing that craft as well as to what the field of composition studies tells us about how writers work. This is an important perspective, because although Melville and Dickinson have become “world authors,” they began by being writers desiring to reach an audience. I showed in a previous chapter that their culture’s idealization of manual labor encouraged authors to figure themselves as engaged in such labor in order to enter the market for symbolic capital. But this physicality was not just a means to justify such participation (and to associate oneself with the production of real, tangible goods as opposed to abstract capital that results from investing); it was also an inescapable fact about the activity. Whether one writes in a temperate, well-lighted library or by candle in an unheated garret, one’s entire body is involved. The craft of writing has its own set of hazards, more subtle but no less real, to the writer, than is the machinist’s risk to fingers and eyes. The technology of typewriting and recent developments in voice-recognition software have tended to blur this fact, but for millennia writing was a handicraft, the hands producing what the mind generates, and the
eyes verifying that production. To understand what Melville and Dickinson were doing when they produced manuscripts thus requires becoming familiar with the physical conditions under which they worked. The fact that these conditions were frequently associated with the stereotype of the poet in a garret starving for his or her art does not detract from the reality of the conditions themselves.

The most important source of information about Dickinson’s practice of the craft of writing is her manuscripts, but those material artifacts only answer the question “what” and not “why” or “how.” Thus, for instance, the manuscript books are usually taken as fair copies, in pen, of earlier drafts. Franklin infers a process: “The stemma for Dickinson’s workshop when fascicles were involved may be generalized,” from worksheet to intermediate draft to copies sent or retained to the actual fascicle or set, then to further copies sent or retained, perhaps further revised, and then yet more copies sent or retained (Introduction to Poems 19). To postulate a “workshop,” even metaphorically, assumes that Dickinson conducted her poetic business in a serious and perhaps even professional fashion, that she was relatively well organized, and that she had at least a metaphorical space within which she crafted her language. Certainly the “stemma” reflects what Franklin terms her “long-distance interest in the fascicles,” her return to them “over many years” (18); this return is documented by a study of the fascicles’ physical details. But other practices that Franklin presents as fact are much more speculative. For instance, he writes that “[h]er workshop did have rules for destruction, though their purpose was orderly preservation. The primary one was that when working drafts were copied to a later form, such as a fascicle, the drafts were destroyed” (11). Because there are few drafts of fascicle poems that can be dated earlier than the fascicles, it is possible that Dickinson destroyed working drafts after making fair copies. This is a fairly standard practice of writers (although some do keep all drafts).

However, we can’t be certain that Dickinson followed this practice, or, if she did, for how long. She may have done a great deal of composing in her head, especially because she had the hymn form to lend structure: relying on a standard structure has been a technique of many oral composers. Scholars continue to debate the unit of Dickinson’s composition: Did she structure her poems primarily according to line length, stanza form, or the shape of the piece of paper on which she wrote, and did this unit change during her writing life? Cristanne Miller contends that Dickinson was committed to rhythm (“Whose Dickinson?” 247–48). Domhnall Mitchell puts
the point even more strongly: “Emphasizing the rhythm of the eye over the rhythms of the ear in reading Dickinson’s poems is . . . equivalent to switching off the music: what’s left is silence” (Measures of Possibility 264). Mitchell suggests, and I agree, that creating verbal music within a context of oral performance was one of her goals, but most scholars—unintentionally, I believe—follow Franklin in emphasizing the written text as the primary vehicle for Dickinson’s composition. Thus, of “If those I loved were lost” (Fr20), Franklin writes that “she had the first line immediately, but the second required adjustment before she could go on; the rest came easily until the final line, which had to be recast,” and, later, “[t]he composition of this poem was typically fast” (11).

Franklin seems to be carrying on the assessment of Dickinson’s first editors and reviewers, that she generally wrote quickly and revised little, so that her work reflects spontaneous outflow rather than laborious crafting but also that her compositional method was written rather than oral and aural. Her “workshop,” according to Franklin, was a site (metaphorically speaking) for the production of new copies, not for laborious crafting of lines and phrases. But given the brevity of most of the poems and their recognizable adherence to stanzaic form, it is also reasonable to imagine Dickinson composing early drafts wholly in her head. Franklin’s detailed description of the manuscripts and his careful attention to dating them deserve the gratitude of all scholars, but when he reads intentions into the evidence, some skepticism is appropriate. For instance, he writes that “[a]s of Fascicle 5, Dickinson was working with a large batch of stationery. Whereas she had used five kinds of paper in the first four fascicles, she made the next four from one kind. She had found her model and, confident that poems would come, laid in plenty of stock. The poems did come, and every month or so she would prepare another sheet” (21). Further, “for the last decade she made no fascicle sheets and near the end grew indifferent to making even second copies, with a number of poems surviving in their initial draft, laid down in a large running script” (26–27). He consistently assumes that Dickinson’s method of composing was based on the written word, an assumption reflected in his speculation that there may have been “as many as 5,000 manuscripts, instead of 2,500” (29). He arrives at this figure by noting that for instance the twenty-seven poems of Fascicle 1 exist in a total of thirty-nine manuscript versions and then by extrapolating, assuming the preparation of working and intermediate drafts (28).

It is tantalizing to think that several thousand more manuscripts await discovery, or even several hundred (perhaps as not-quite-completely burned scraps in a buried heap of ashes or other household rubbish, if not
in a sheaf of papers stored but uncatalogued in an archive). But scholars might better invest their energy in considering Dickinson’s composing as informed by oral and aural considerations. After all, as she wrote around 1862,

A word is dead, when it is said
Some say—
I say it just begins to live
That day. (Fr278)

We should never limit a Dickinson utterance to its literal meaning, but neither should we disallow the literal as one plausible interpretation among many, all of which could have been intended. Thus, she may well have meant that speaking brings words into existence and that the life is then preserved by writing, even while she was also sensitive to the performative character of this utterance (the referenced statements are brought into being by “Some say” and “I say”) and to the possible irony thus created. Given the gnomic quality of Dickinson’s speech, as noted by many acquaintances, some of her poems may have been drafted and revised aloud, although certainly when working with groups of poems or when returning to a poem months later, she needed manuscript copies.

Dickinson’s reliance on handwritten letters and poems to communicate with her actual audiences is consistent with a writing process influenced by an oral and aural aesthetic as well as by an aesthetic of the handwritten word. This aesthetic was supported by the metaphor of the body-minded brain as well as by the practice of portfolio poetry, both of which emphasized an immediate, personal, even visceral and physiological response to a poem. Certainly the manuscript evidence suggests that in preparing rough copies Dickinson wrote quickly, but it is equally certain that we just don’t know how much composition preceded these copies. Werner’s nuanced analysis assumes that Dickinson composed mainly or wholly in writing rather than aloud or in her head. Werner’s phrase “the style of the dictation” implies a process in which writing serves mainly to record speech (either inner or voiced), directed at an audience willing to regard her pen or pencil as an extension of her mind, capturing raw inspiration. McGann’s assessment of the fascicles as moving away from the “horizon of [print] publication” in their arrangement on the page also supports this line of thought. He speculates that the change in how Dickinson arranged lines on the page from fascicles 1–8 to the later fascicles represents her decision “to use her text page as a scene for dramatic interplays between a poetics of the eye and a poetics of the ear” (“Composition as Explanation” 120).
That is, the poems in the earlier fascicles “have been imagined under a horizon of publication,” whereas those of the later show her “reject[ing] a market model of publishing” (122) and applying “writing conventions permitted and encouraged in the textuality of personal correspondence,” of “epistolary intercourse” (123).

Dickinson’s method of composing may have been aural/oral or her method of presenting her work may have been intended to imply spontaneity and hence unedited inspiration. Both possibilities are supported by the reports of her conversation, especially from individuals like Higginson who were in a position to confer symbolic capital. About his visit to Dickinson in 1870, he wrote to his wife that the poet seemed at first a child (he uses “child” or “childlike” three times in two sentences) but then “talked soon & thenceforward continuously—and deferentially—sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her—but readily recommencing. Manner between Angie Tilton & Mr. Alcott—but thoroughly ingenuous & simple which they are not & saying many things which you would have thought foolish & I wise—and some things you wd. hv. liked” (Letters 473). The impression conveyed by this letter and the one he wrote immediately after is that of a stream of talk coming from the poet, punctuated occasionally by questions from him, an impression strengthened by his reflective comment two decades later: “She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour’s interview. . . . I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods” (quoted by Johnson, Letters 476). Comparing this experience to one taking place “in the woods” also explicitly situates Dickinson within the portfolio-poetry context, connoting spontaneous inspiration by nature but not careful revision.

Such reports are usually accepted as reflecting Dickinson’s personality or the persona she wanted to create for her addressee. Possibly, she intended her conversations with people like Higginson to enhance her cultural stock by strengthening the impression of thoughts flowing without interruption and with relatively little editing from mind to speech or speechlike writing. Like her poems and letters, these conversations—and indeed her penchant for white dresses and seclusion—can be read as crafted, rhetorically sophisticated performances, carried out for audiences who were in a position to grant the symbolic capital of prestige and consecration. Such an interpretation runs counter to the romantic privileging of inspired, spontaneous lyricism, as expressed in Emerson’s description of the poetic youth. Recent scholarship holds that Dickinson was a conscientious and reflective artist. This evaluation transforms the poet earlier generations thought they knew; extant texts, both poems and letters, reveal her careful imposture of breathless spontaneity, an imposture pres-
ent throughout her writing career. I’m arguing for a second, less dramatic transformation, a poet whose poetics was significantly “of the ear” and for whom the handwritten text was not—or not only—an end in itself but a way of stimulating oral performance and aural reception. In fact, as I show in chapter 5, the posthumous, twentieth-century Dickinson has moved well beyond visual renderings of the verbal (whether Johnson or Franklin, reading edition or variorum, type or manuscript, print or hypertext) to include the spoken, heard, and viewed.

If indeed Dickinson was pursuing symbolic capital within the immediate but also ephemeral context of performance, it makes sense that she would shift later in her career from pen to pencil. Werner refers to her use of pencil and paper as “the greatest economy of means”: “For, unlike the pen, which produces a permanent memory trace, the lines drawn by the lead point of the stylus are easily erased and retraced so that each act of copying constitutes a new performance—improvisation or extension of a thought-event” (Open Folios 23). Writing that appears transitory and improvisatory is unlikely to invite commodification. Werner generalizes: “The economy in which she worked, Love’s deviant economy, is also the economy of the Outlaw. . . . And in this alternative economy, opposed to consistency, productivity, and profit, Dickinson issued her private, successive editions of abandonment” (Open Folios 27). Werner’s lyrical assessment is compelling but also misleading. The “economy” within which Dickinson worked was a respected alternative to that of print publication and was not “deviant” or necessarily related to “Love.” Dickinson indeed desired “profit” (capital), just not of the economic sort. And as I demonstrated in chapter 3, she probably understood that her works had absolute legal protection as long as they remained in manuscript: she did not simply decide not to have her work printed, she decided to present it in handwritten form. Whereas Werner advocates a reading of Dickinson as a writer, I argue that she was seeking the cultural authority of “authorship,” albeit outside of the mechanisms of commercial print publication.

The materials on which Dickinson wrote, ranging from fine stationery to household scraps, may or may not have contributed to her quest for authorial authority. It is likely that her use of new, high-quality paper for fair copies of poems in both the fascicles and the letters signals her pride in her work and her hope or expectation that this work would be respectfully received. At the other end of the materials spectrum, it is also possible, as Sally Bushell argues, that Dickinson chose specific scraps of paper in order either to “reclaim” them, “giving them a new life as text,” or to “liberate” herself by using something that could be “thrown away if it is no good” (44). Bushell also writes that “[p]ut simply, a mid-nineteenth-century flyer
from a pharmacist’s shop is worth less than an Emily Dickinson manuscript poem, first draft, existing only in a single state” (48), although it seems a stretch to read that twentieth-century cash value back into Dickinson’s intention or hope regarding how either her contemporaries or future readers might receive the work. There is no evidence that a writer of Dickinson’s time could have accrued symbolic capital by sending scraps of paper to those correspondents whose esteem she valued, although certainly the juxtaposition of her words and the print or illustration on a scrap could be valued for its wit. Without any evidence that she shared these works, however, the cautious scholar will refrain from asserting intentionality. Like Bushell, Melanie Hubbard offers the “working fiction” that Dickinson “had artistic intentions for her more fugitive creations,” her scraps of poems on scraps of paper (“Apartments” 56). Yes, “fiction.” It is certainly possible that she imagined herself as engaged in (probably ironic) play or dialog with anything printed on those scraps as well as with their original context, but any such interpretation must remain speculative.

Like Dickinson (as far as we know), Melville composed in isolation; unlike her, writing was his main occupation for a number of years. His letters document periods of what we today term writer’s block, some of which were doubtless caused by his sense of not being able to write what as he put it he felt “most moved to write” because it would not “pay” (Correspondence 191, letter of 1 [?] June 1851). The manuscript evidence of early drafts is skimpy but consistent: it shows him composing rough drafts in pencil in a nearly indecipherable hand, with frequent insertions and deletions. The Northwestern-Newberry editors’ discussion of the surviving manuscript leaf of Typee applies to Melville’s practices in general. As with most writers, his first drafts contained “false starts” and “transpositions”; copying these drafts, he made a few changes, as shown by phrases being canceled and replaced on the same line, and other changes at a later time, inserted above a line (Hayford et al. 363–64). According to Renker, he tended to write dense sentences and then expand them by unpacking (89). When he began his career, the “scene of writing,” to use Renker’s phrase, was that of the journalist, emphasizing immediate connection between writer and reader through language that had been spontaneously produced. That scene changed twice in a significant way. First, no later than the composition of Mardi, he had put off the journalist’s hat and began weighing his work in terms of the praise he hoped to receive from the contemporaries he admired. Second, once he finally secured full-time employment in December of 1866 at the New York Custom House, writing became an after-hours activity rather than his ostensible profession.

In his letters, Melville noted a few times that he felt he was getting
better at his craft. One of the early comments is in the letter of 15 July 1846 to John Murray, in which he wrote, regarding what would become *Omoo*, that the manuscript “will be in a rather better state for the press than the M.S.S. handed to him . . . by my brother. A little experience in this art of book-craft has done wonders” (*Correspondence* 58). The process of readying *Typee* for the printer probably affected not only that book but Melville’s “later habits of writing” (Howard 280). Murray had actually paid an editor, Henry Milton, fifty pounds for one hundred sixty-eight hours of work on that first manuscript, an amount that was “just over half the amount Melville was paid”; this fact must have contributed significantly to Melville’s desire to provide a more printworthy copy of his next book (Howard 282).

Three other important aspects of Melville’s composing process differ dramatically from what we know of Dickinson’s: he made liberal use of print sources; he relied on copyists (the women of his household) to prepare fair copies; and he came to recognize and thematize the limitations of the handwritten page, the printed page, and language in general. It has often been noted that in a literary culture known for extensive borrowing, Melville was an extreme case. Plausibly, his thematizing of writing and his desire to accrue symbolic capital were also influenced by an internal conflict between using sources without acknowledgment and conceiving of authorship as original composition. The practice has consequences as well for a writer’s sense of his potential for earning all types of capital: Is the writer’s capital actually his own if he has built it on borrowing? Plagiarism, even by the relatively loose standards of the nineteenth century, may be characterized as the equivalent of taking out a loan at a high interest rate; if the book is unsuccessful in any market, the writer may well feel guilt at having borrowed. One way to relieve this guilt is to believe that economic failure connotes artistic success: the garret life, metaphorically speaking, justifies certain kinds of theft.

Certainly, the values of the literary marketplace within which Melville worked were ambiguous. “The culture of reprinting” was prominent in nineteenth-century America, as McGill has shown, a culture that commodified authors and their works but did not condone outright theft. It was also fairly standard for authors to borrow liberally without attribution. But it was something else entirely for an author to claim, as Melville did, that firsthand experience was the principal basis of a work when the facts were otherwise: for *Typee* and *Omoo* he had “used, misused, and downright abused his sources” (Parker, *Herman Melville* 1:456). Parker summarizes the careful detective work of Harrison Hayford on the composition of *Typee*: “Hayford’s detailed account of Melville’s depredations
on his sources conveys something of the reckless fun Melville must have had during the commission of the purloinings and adaptings” (1:456–57). Parker’s diction seems intended to keep at bay what Renker terms the “specter of plagiarism”; these weren’t thefts but “purloinings and adaptations,” and Melville’s purpose was only to have “fun,” not to profit from someone else’s labor. Perhaps.

Dickinson, of course, famously eschewed literary borrowing, noting in one of her earlier letters to Higginson “I marked a line in One Verse—because I met it after I made it—and never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person—[new paragraph] I do not let go it, because it is mine” (Letters 415, August 1862). Melville, too, when he moved to poetry was pursuing a different market that preferred originality. His recognition that this was a different market is clear from his instructions regarding the preparation of the now lost Poems that he had completed by 1860. He apparently believed that he could create a new authorial persona, although he was probably still relying heavily on print sources if those poems were anything like what he included in Battle-Pieces. For that volume he claimed in a prefatory note that the poems “originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond” and “were composed without reference to collective arrangement.” He went on to say that from “the events and incidents of the conflict” were taken those that “chanced to imprint themselves upon the mind,” and, most strongly invoking the romantic convention of inspiration, that “[y]ielding instinctively, one after another, to feelings not inspired from any one source exclusively, and unmindful, without purposing to be, of consistency, I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings” (Battle-Pieces, first edition). Whether the discrepancy between his actual practice and his claimed method caused him any inner conflict in this particular instance, we will probably never know, but such conflict was clearly present throughout much if not all of his writing life otherwise. One wonders where his writer’s allegiance lay—was he evoking the Aeolian harp merely to gain traction with readers? If his imagination had necessitated for almost two decades that he write with verbal or visual sources, why could he not finally come clean, so to speak, with the audience he desired to secure?

In shifting from prose to poetry, Melville preserved some aspects of his composing process, such as the use of pencil and the reliance on sources (including his own journal in the case of Clarel), but other aspects changed; most dramatically, he could draw on metrical forms, and he need not feel driven to fill up the blank page but could instead exploit its space.
According to Renker, the manuscripts and language of the published volumes show that “the material presence of writing had become a conceptual problem for Melville that had specific and particular consequences in his engagements with individual, physical pages” (101). He took scissors to the manuscript pages of the *Battle-Pieces* poems, a “compositional practice [that] speaks to Melville’s awareness of his poems as both materially discrete and materially variable entities . . . whose physical form he consistently engaged as part of his process of production” (102). These were “pieces” not only on analogy with painting but also as in “the nature of the poems themselves as he conceived it” (102). He became interested in “controlling the white page, a space that is both inherently more present to the poet than to the novelist and also more fundamentally visible within the nominal product itself” (103).

Renker’s reading of Melville’s relationship to “the art of book-craft” appropriately stresses how he connected the material aspects of writing and book production to the ontological and epistemological status and function of language. One can come away from her *Strike Through the Mask* with the impression that no other writer of the time was as fascinated and troubled by the connections or as well suited, by intellect and temperament, to problematize them. This is where the comparison to Dickinson sheds light: she too practiced that art, but her crafted books more resemble commonplace books, keepsake volumes, scrapbooks, and diaries than anything emanating from the publishing industry. As Alexandra Socarides has recently demonstrated, Dickinson possibly (Socarides argues probably) had these types of artifacts in mind when creating her fascicles. Certainly, if Melville only understood book production to involve the preparation of mass-produced novels and volumes of verse, it would be surprising to find him using white space, copying others’ words—in general, concentrating on the material aspects of “the art of book-craft.” However, the literary culture of his time included many more markets than those targeted by mass-produced print. Insofar as Melville is to be understood not just as the author of published prose fiction and poetry but also as a writer of manuscripts that preceded publication and that he idealized as the “best” format for his ideas, the context of nonprint publishing must also be considered. No less than Dickinson, Melville emphasized the materiality of text, because of both ontological and epistemological concerns and the literary culture of his time. Both writers practiced a complex “art of book-craft” spanning the complete process from composition to production; both celebrated the fact that this art could yield individualized items whose value was qualitatively different from that of the published book.
The Persona as a Commodity in a Material Economy

This chapter’s first two sections demonstrate that the material text represented for Dickinson and Melville a literal embodiment of what was in the writer’s mind. While both attended to the craft of writing, their attention differed in kind: for Melville the material processes of writing constituted a “conceptual problem” whereas for Dickinson the conceptual problem had more to do with the material product. They also differed in the outcome of their crafting: printed books for Melville and handcrafted manuscripts for Dickinson (although Melville wished he could indulge himself in the latter). Key phrases that characterize one author’s process are interestingly skewed for the other: the “art of book-craft,” writing under a “horizon of publication,” the processes of writing as a “conceptual problem,” “incarnational poetics.” Skewed or straight, these phrases remind us that each writer was intensely engaged with the physical act of writing, the material products resulting from this engagement, and the various economies in which the products and processes participated. Whichever kind of “book-craft” the writer practiced involved an incarnation of self into material text; the “horizon of publication” demarcated two vastly different types of market and capital—economic and symbolic—with participation in one requiring or entailing rejection of or failure in the other.

Each writer’s attention to the materiality of his or her media illuminates a desire to participate in a field of restricted production. This participation involves the producers controlling evaluation rather than allowing an external, consuming public to establish value. Asserting the primacy of their own physiological responses was another way for Melville and Dickinson to demonstrate their credibility as producers of symbolic capital. It was widely accepted that the human mind had a material basis, that it was not only “soul” but also “brain.” Although the pseudosciences of physiognomy, phrenology, and mesmerism had all been seriously critiqued (and the first wholly discredited) by the middle of the nineteenth century, they survived as plot devices and as metaphors and were understood as necessary precursors to the new discoveries in neural physiology. This conceptual context supported the presence or at least the appearance of “naturalness” in writing—both epistolary and poetic. The culture’s recognition that naturalness could be crafted is reflected in Emerson’s 1840 essay “New Poetry,” Higginson’s reference to that essay in his introduction of Dickinson to a reading public (in the essay “An Open Portfolio” and the preface to the first edition of poems, both published in 1890), and Poe’s 1845 article “Anastatic Printing” (describing a technology by which
writers could create, at home, plates of manuscript pages, which would enable the printing of those pages in facsimile) (Esdale 4–6). Such writing was valuable because it reflected a spontaneous eruption of passionate thought.

Both Melville and Dickinson emphasized the material relationship between mind and brain, represented their culture as based on material values, and understood that to their readers—whether individuals or publics—they were in a tangible sense what they wrote. Dickinson and Melville understood that this transformation negates the power of one of the producers—the writer—by replacing the writer with the book, or with the book and a mass-produced photograph. Obviously, artists defend themselves against commodity fetishization by refusing to participate in the mass production of their work. It is not impossible for a unique work of art to be separated from its maker, but it is unlikely: the labor of the artist is visibly manifest in the individual work of art, or, rather, the individual physical work of art represents the intellectual, esthetic, and emotional labor of the artist. A second defense is to craft personae that can be taken as the author himself or herself yet can be disowned by the author if the personae begin to become commodities. (Once the author is dead, of course, the personae can develop a cash value, as I discuss in chapter 5.) Melville’s gift of himself to Dana, in the form of a manuscript, could never have achieved commodity status, nor could Dickinson’s letters and the poems she included with letters, unless they were mass-produced.

Implementing these two defenses enabled Melville and Dickinson to compete within a material-based economy for symbolic capital. Their similar responses to the logic of consumption resulted from two main causes. First, they recognized that the print establishment was basically conservative, that reviewers set narrow standards, hence that there was little room for experiments that violated either genre or gender expectations and boundaries. Both Melville and Dickinson voiced awareness of the mass market, and their manuscript practices reflect a recognition of and commitment to the value of the manuscripts themselves as both physical artifact and conceptual work—Dickinson in all of her written output, Melville especially in his handling of white space in his poetry manuscripts.

The second cause combined the widespread practice of circulating work in handcrafted formats (portfolio poetry, scrapbooks, commonplace books) with the almost total lack of a restricted field for print publication in America that valued the pure, the abstract, and the esoteric, at least during the most significant decades of these writers’ lives (roughly 1840–1870). The dramatic expansion of the reading public meant that publishers did not need to aim for specific and limited markets but could
play freely in the field of large-scale production. No significant circle was advocating the autonomy of art; no publisher needed to make a place for abstract or esoteric literature—“thought-diving” literature. As I’ve shown in chapter 1, the field of restricted production that did exist accommodated the “higher literature,” that is, “the select standards of [classic] literature, such works as Milton’s, Addison’s, Johnson’s, Gibbon’s, Russell’s” (“Readers by the Millions” 839) and the analogous contemporary standards.

Under these conditions, consecration and autonomy—two essential conditions for symbolic capital—could reasonably be pursued by emphasizing the physicality of the discrete text, the materiality of one’s response to it, and the uniqueness of the persona embodied in the text. The materialist psychology of Melville and Dickinson gives value to the physical response generated by the individual work, although this value is not spiritual or transcendent. The discrete artifact has value not because it can be reproduced and sold but because it has been crafted within and for a field of restricted production, can be evaluated on the basis of the physical response it generates, and can earn symbolic capital for the writer. Melville and Dickinson understood that because their culture was driven by a material economy, they had to generate tangible products. Those products shaped their twentieth-century “careers,” a topic I take up in my final chapter. The “supposed persons” embodied in those products have to a large extent shaped the popular understanding of each author as well as influenced the scholarly view. Yet each writer actually took considerable pains to separate the written self from the biographical self.

We can look to Fanny Fern’s novel *Ruth Hall*, published in 1855, for an example of the type of materiality Melville and Dickinson were trying to avoid. Ruth’s husband dies, leaving her with two children and no means of earning a living; both his family and hers refuse to aid her. She suddenly conceives the idea of writing “for the papers,” remembering that “while at boarding-school, an editor of a paper in the same town used often to come in and take down her compositions in short-hand as she read them aloud, and transfer them to the columns of his paper” (115). She has to contact many papers before placing even one piece, but that first success gives her hope: “[I]t was at least a *beginning*, a stepping-stone” (125). Fern emphasizes Ruth’s labor and has her identify with other laborers involved in print production. Her ability to earn her living requires some economic capital, at least enough to pay her rent and buy bread and lamp oil, and the work is not only physically exhausting but painful on her eyes. Clearly, Ruth is to be praised for earning her crust of bread, and she is to be admired for recognizing the cash value of her work so that she does not
allow it essentially to be stolen from her, as was done by that editor who used her school compositions.

Ruth’s composing practice allies her with portfolio poetry and other nonprint-publication genres, as she seems to do only a single draft. Her productions are valued because they reflect unalloyed inspiration, but they are also understood not to represent the highest level of crafting. An even more important similarity with that set of practices is that Ruth’s identity—or, rather, the question of her identity, as she writes under the pseudonym “Floy”—contributes to her economic value: “And so, while Ruth scribbled away in her garret, the public were busying themselves in conjecturing who ‘Floy’ might be” (133). The career of Ruth/Floy is similar to that of her creator, Fanny Fern, but those similarities are less important here than is the way Ruth manages her pseudonym in order to project a sense of her actual self and ultimately cashes in the disguise in exchange for the promise of marriage to Mr. Walter. Melville and Dickinson were probably aware of the novel’s main events even though neither is known to have read it, and they were also probably aware of its basis in fact. In this sense Ruth Hall might have been a model not to follow. For her, the use of a pseudonym was purely a means to achieve economic capital. To drive home this point, Fern included in the novel not just references to Ruth’s new prosperity but, in the penultimate chapter, a reproduction of a bank-stock certificate she now holds, worth ten thousand dollars (209).

Writing with pen, by the light of an oil lamp, in a garret, for a broad and sympathetic public, and protecting her privacy—all of this in order to support her children—Floy was an exemplary female domestic author of her time. Her goal of financial security of course could only be reached with the assistance of men, and she had to rely on men to compensate her fairly and protect her secret identity. Ultimately, the persona became the author and became, as well, a fetishized commodity within the capitalist market. Employing multiple personae, as Dickinson did, was one way to protect oneself against such an outcome. She almost certainly recognized that the single persona was the essential material component, the fetishized commodity, connecting the producing author to the consuming public. Readers in nineteenth-century America understood themselves to be achieving a personal connection with authors, who in turn traded on this expectation. Creating multiple personae, however, allows for indefinite recycling and reconception, thus providing the writer with a defense against being consumed by a public.
Reading Dickinson in this way, however, should be complemented by recognizing that she also used personae in her poems and letters as means to effect the engagement of her readers, not just as part of a rhetorical strategy of self-defense. Salska writes that “[a]s a vehicle of intimacy, the genre of personal correspondence constituted a perfect form for such a ‘creative writing’ program” as Dickinson practiced, that is, a form within which the writer could “enlarge[e] . . . [her] emotional experience“ while “practicing the craft and skill of its expression” (171). Salska’s interpretation requires the additional step of reading Dickinson as slyly challenging the expected association of intimacy with honesty: if the writer is revealing her inmost self, the revelation must be truthful. Personal correspondence constituted a field within which symbolic capital could be amassed; in fact, Salska aptly emphasizes that with her letters Dickinson “prepared and created an audience for her poetry” (168)—placed the poems within a limited field where they could be evaluated. That evaluation would not be wholly autonomous, because the era’s readers assessed a work in terms of its author; knowing this, Dickinson may have hoped to create, for the secret pleasure of thought-diving readers, an ironic distance between persona and author. That distance would be signaled to recipients of multiple texts by the variations in personae. The genres within which Dickinson preferred to work—the personal letter, the lyric poem, the diary or scrapbook or commonplace book—presumed a truthful and open relationship between writer and reader, and there were surely many times when she honored this expectation. But her personae loom too large in her work, and her comment to Higginson about “supposed persons” is too explicit, to take such honoring as consistent. As Shira Wolosky explains, Dickinson incarnated her work into “a private manuscript-body while refusing the public exposure of publication. . . . She both would and would not incarnate herself in texts . . . would embody herself in manuscript but not in outward publication” (95)—except that it is really not “herself” even in the manuscripts. Her symbolic capital would thus depend on her most astute readers recognizing and valuing a somewhat shadowy figure known by her ability to create masks and known by those masks as masks. Not coincidentally, Dickinson’s diligent investing of herself in “supposed persons” also resolves the conflict she felt between the desire to preserve herself for herself and the desire to separate herself from both body and soul in order to shake free of the latter: embodying those components, the personae could easily be “spent” without any spending of her self (Katz 70).
Melville’s case reveals the same fundamental desire to market not himself but a “supposed person,” albeit complexly framed by the novelistic convention of distance between a homodiegetic narrator and the creating author, by the default reading assumption that a narrative’s “I” is the author (an assumption that was just as common in Melville’s time as in our own), and by his era’s strong preference for factually true narratives. The second and third of these frame components determined the reception of Typee and Omoo: Melville presented them thus to his publishers and advertised the affidavit written by his shipmate Toby Greene. He seems to have accepted the reading public’s “fusion of literary and personal experience.” Mardi, his third novel, however, he obviously wanted to be evaluated autonomously, because a man known as having “lived among the cannibals” (as he referred to himself in the famous June 1851 letter to Hawthorne—Correspondence 193) could contribute little of general value to a civilized society. On 28 January 1849, Melville wrote to John Murray, offering him Mardi. The editorial headnote to this letter points out that “Melville requests double Murray’s original offer . . . and reiterates his confidence that his reputation has reached the status of ‘guinea author,’ deserving of publication in a more expensive format” (Correspondence 114). But he also desired that Mardi not be associated with his earlier work: “Unless you deem it very desirable do not put me down on the title page as ‘the author of Typee & Omoo.’ I wish to separate ‘Mardi’ as much as possible from those books” (114–15).

For at least the next half-dozen years Melville continued to believe that he could simultaneously earn symbolic and economic capital simply as Herman Melville, not as the author of Typee and Omoo. Early in his (significantly pseudonymous) essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” published in the Literary World 17 August 1850, he wrote, “Would that all excellent books were foundlings, without father or mother, that so it might be, we could glorify them, without including their ostensible authors” (Piazza Tales 239). But such glorification was impossible; he certainly understood that next to subgenre classification, the author’s name was “the chief way of describing a book” (Baym 250). A few pages later he described how reading actually happens: “No man can read a fine author, and relish him to his very bones, while he reads, without subsequently fancying to himself some image of the man and his mind” (Piazza Tales 249). As with his suggestion that he send Hawthorne a “fin” of his whale book, this statement figures not only writing but the writer as an object for consumption. He then asserted that the writer probably “has somewhere furnished you
with his own picture,” although he implies that the self-portrait would not stand out as such but would be blended with “the multitude of likenesses to be sketched” (249). If the author is indeed going to be consumed, it is far better that he be “ostensible” rather than actual, even while the actual author flits among the multitude of characters and can be only inferred from authorial personae within a framework of irony. Unfortunately, Melville’s authorial self had been fixed by his first two novels. Evert Duyckinck referred as late as 1857 to Melville as “Typee” (Leyda 563), not as White-Jacket or Ishmael; with even his old friend and mentor continuing to hold the actual author and his later personae hostage, as it were, to the first authorial identity, Melville’s comment about foundlings seems sadly prescient.

He raised again the title-page issue early in 1856 when negotiating with the firm of Dix and Edwards for the publication of a volume of stories to include “Benito Cereno” and “Bartleby,” but his tone in this correspondence is almost fatalistic. He wrote: “About having the author’s name on the title-page, you may do as you deem best; but any appending of titles of former works is hardly worth while” (Correspondence 284). And as I have already noted, his directions for the title page of the lost Poems of 1860 indicated that he wanted to come before the public as a brand-new author, not even claiming Moby-Dick. To sum up, then, in 1849 Melville may have failed to grasp that the limited audience composed of “men who dive” into thinking was not of commercial interest to Murray (Letter to Duyckinck, 3 March 1849, Correspondence 121). By 1856 he had probably learned that no publisher truly “in business” could share his goal of reaching that audience within the medium of prose. There remained poetry, which was sufficiently different from the novel that he probably thought he could escape the Typee albatross. We don’t know why he was unable to find a publisher for the 1860 volume, and we also don’t know what he requested of Harper and Brothers with respect to Battle-Pieces. But Harper’s did list the volume as “By the Author of ‘Typee’ and ‘Omoo’” in their list of new books for September 1866 and continued the identification, along with several favorable sentences from the New York Times, an advertising ploy they repeated in the October list and again in the summary end-of-year list. (All of these announcements were made in the end papers of Harper’s Monthly.) Melville certainly did not escape his old identity, but at least he was able to add a new component, being recognized as not only the author of travel romances; this transformation would probably not have been possible for him a decade or two earlier.

From this point on, Melville remained almost exclusively within the field of restricted production, practicing the materialist aesthetic to which
he had always been drawn. While his relationship to the act of writing would remain somewhat combative, it was no longer a matter of livelihood. Like the Hawthorne he had described in 1850, he could finally “refrain from all the popularizing noise and show of broad farce,” rather than like Shakespeare be “forced to the contrary course by circumstances” (Piazza Tales 245). Not surprisingly, his manipulation of personae continued. I have already noted the discrepancy between the facts of the composition of Battle-Pieces and Melville’s introductory description of that composition, a description clearly intended to convey an impression of an authorial persona who was merely capturing thoughts and ideas. A further discrepancy is between that impression and the voice in many of the poems, a voice characterized by lofty and at times archaic diction, frequent inversions of syntax, heroic apostrophes, a somber tone, and other markers suggesting that the author felt himself to be speaking for and to his country. Milder finds that three personae appear sequentially in Battle-Pieces: a “meditative speaker” in the opening poems, a “Laureate, who will celebrate Northern victories and heroes in a tone of righteous jubilation,” and finally a “Reconciler (heir to Lincoln)” (175, 179). But within this general progression, more voices appear. Some of the poems are explicitly dialogic, incorporating a second identified speaker (in “Malvern Hill” the final stanza is spoken by “We elms of Malvern Hill”) or an alternate perspective signaled by italics (most notably “The Armies of the Wilderness”). Melville’s penultimate published volume, John Marr and Other Sailors (1888), continues the manipulation. The title poem of 62 lines in the voice of John Marr is prefaced by six pages of third-person prose summarizing the life of the speaker; “Bridegroom Dick” is a fifteen-page monologue; “Tom Deadlight” follows the pattern of “John Marr” but in much briefer compass. As with Dickinson, traits of diction and syntax that are consistent across a large number of poems tempt a reader to identify those traits with the writer himself or herself, especially given our New-Critical heritage that privileges the lyric speaker. But such identification ignores the writers’ fascination with masks and masking.

The manipulation of personae by Melville and Dickinson should not be surprising, because the persona was an important coin of the realm within the antimimetic market. Melville’s career-long use of personae could simply be termed an element of his style, but the question would still remain, why did he keep returning to that element? Edgar Dryden asks why Melville in the final poem of Timoleon, in the words “that close his collection and his publishing career, should choose to speak in the voice of an obscure and ambiguous historical figure” (194). Certainly, as Dryden says, this choice indicates Melville’s “deeply ironic” response to the concept...
of a literary career. But why then print this volume, even privately? Dryden makes the same point with respect to John Marr, whose introduction reveals a “deep distrust of public performance and the printed page” (152)—again, if Melville so distrusted “the printed page,” why print? The plausible answer is that like Dickinson he was committed to coming before readers, and like Dickinson he had determined that using personae allowed him to present a counterfeit self, one that could continually be reprinted, rewritten, or otherwise reinstated without any cost to himself. The conclusion of The Confidence-Man is emblematic in this respect: it isn’t the shifty Cosmopolitan for whom readers fear an unfortunate outcome, but the open and honest (or at least honest-seeming) old man. If anyone is going to profit from the final transaction, it won’t be he. The novel concludes: “[T]he next moment, the waning light expired . . . while in the darkness which ensued, the cosmopolitan kindly led the old man away. Something further may follow of this Masquerade” (251). Typically for Melville (and the same can be said of Dickinson), the syntax at this crucial point creates rich ambiguity: possible referents for “this Masquerade” can range from the immediate situation in the novel to the novel itself. It is impossible to determine what the Cosmopolitan’s intentions are and equally impossible to determine whether his creator is endorsing, criticizing, or simply presenting him for observation.

In the same way, Melville and Dickinson understood that their writing accrued its value within a self-contradictory framework. On the one hand, the physical, handcrafted or otherwise self-published artifact signified an intimate and sincere connection to the writer’s self, after the fashion of scrapbooks, commonplace books, and portfolio poetry. On the other hand, each writer’s commitment to the use of supposed persons signified an invitation to a different kind of transaction, more abstract and esoteric, that would take place in an antimimetic market. This was still not a market that welcomed textual “foundlings,” but to enter it with a set of counterfeit selves protected the writer from being consumed down to “his very bones.” The writer participates in a material, mimetic economy, but the writer’s contributions are counterfeit; the antimimetic economy to which the writer is principally dedicated actually values the counterfeiting skills, not least because the aesthetics of this economy are based on rejecting the values of the mimetic economy.

While Melville and Dickinson used personae to defend themselves against being consumed by their contemporaries, those personae are consumed today as if they are the actual authors. Virginia Jackson emphasizes this outcome with respect to Dickinson: “We can (and inevitably will) keep reading Emily Dickinson as one of the great examples of a subjectivity
committed to the page. Yet the very insistence of that commitment urges us to reconsider our placement of the subject on the page, or within the identifying loops of reading through which she predicted her writing would be mastered” (“Faith in Anatomy” 107–8). Scholars and readers must become aware of the “fundamental problem of identifying writing too transparently with personhood—indeed, of consuming writing as personhood” (87, 102). Awareness of this problem was significantly lacking in the twentieth century, as I will show in the next chapter, when both writers were closely identified with their personae, albeit personae filtered through a twentieth-century critique of what was presented as the nineteenth-century’s failure to recognize greatness.