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That Damned Mob of Scribbling Siblings:  
The American Romance as Anti-novel in  
*The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre*

It might be said that 1850s sentimentalism was the demure response to literary sensationalism that effectively unsexed the American woman. Admittedly, it may seem that the business of the sentimental novel is to rescue abandoned adolescent girls from the risky and lascivious life that was the downfall of their eighteenth-century sisters, girls who if not exactly orphaned encountered sexual trouble at balls and boarding schools, or at the very least when their parents were out of the room. But in the explosively popular novels published half a century later, stories of family are no longer gripped by overt sensuality and vice. The impoverished urchin Gerty in *The Lamplighter* (1854), the forsaken tomboy Capitola in *The Hidden Hand* (1859), the deathbed angel Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the motherless saint Ellen in the 1850 hit *The Wide, Wide World*: these younger and tirelessly good-hearted girls appear at first glance to miss out on the racier dimensions of female independence, their tales, on the surface at least, more interested in stabilizing the relationships between parents and children than in dealing, as do sensational tales of seduction, with the unfortunate facts of how children are made in the first place.

The false rift between the sensational and the sentimental overlooks the dark side of sentimentality: incestuous desires, murders, and seductions abound in sentimental literature, frequently sideswiping the neat trajectory of tearful happy endings that a gross overgeneralization of this genre would imply. Likewise, sensational texts like Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) acquaint us with plenty of besought orphans

and angelic children. The sensationalism of literature published after the Revolution, featuring seduction as a sort of gateway crime leading to suicide, bastardy, insanity, and murder, cannot therefore be so easily divorced from those vanilla kinship dramas of the nineteenth century.

The incest romance proposes a haltingly forthright union between the sensational (sex) and the sentimental (family), a union that draws on the interrelatedness and ensuing volatility of these two genres. Surely it is hard to imagine anything more dramatically compelling than lovers discovering they are siblings. Nevertheless, they get upstaged by the generic disintegration of the texts in which that discovery is made, indeed in two of the most contested American novels: what some argue is the first American novel, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy: or, the Triumph of Nature, Founded in Truth* (1789), and Herman Melville's embattled novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852). The relationship between these texts has been overlooked—a shared argument that Brown begins and Melville revisits—namely that the American romance is most effectively told through what we might call the anti-novel. Separated by over sixty years, these two deviant narratives nevertheless wield the same obstinately unsteady hand that resists rhetorical consistency to tell what is essentially the same story. That story insists that the literature of the republic own up to its sensational leanings, its romance with the family, the shared bed of brother and sister. Even so, what most powerfully brings these two texts together is not just the abandonment of sibling chastity but the desertion of a single rhetorical strategy.

In the specific context of *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre*, the term *anti-novel* describes the text's lack of a single genre with the capacity to explore romantic feeling as a democratizing, unstable, even profane condition. These two works imagine America in a state of romantic confusion and relational ambiguity, and they use incest toward that conception. "Indeed," writes Leonard Tennenhouse, "if forced to choose whether America was originally imagined as a family or as a political affiliation among men, I would say that our nation had to have thought of itself as a family first in order to be characterized as a polity of god-fearing owners of property."<sup>1</sup> We might go even further to suggest that if American literature represented the republic as anything "first," it was as troubled lovers for whom everything is unrelentingly and even necessarily uncertain. Thus *The Power of Sym-*

*pathy* refuses genre classification with its hodgepodge of sensational and sentimental prose, and *Pierre* offers a metadiscourse of shifting rhetorics whose narrator darkly asserts “I write precisely as I please” right before he starts killing everybody off.<sup>2</sup>

Brown’s and Melville’s genre-busting plots might be summarized together: the bastard daughters of dead mistresses discover their paternities through erotically charged relationships with their half-brothers, and then everybody dies. At first glance, *The Power of Sympathy* might seem to bear little resemblance to *Pierre* except for these surface elements of plot. A deeper look reveals, however, that both texts also do violence to their own narrative structures. The erratic style used to tell these stories accomplishes even more instability than that produced by madwomen and the men who lust after them, although there are plenty of the latter. Ostensibly a sentimental warning against the social hazards of seduction in the new republic, *The Power of Sympathy* is also a rigorous philosophical treatise on the nature of romance and language. Its overt antiseduction agenda is eclipsed by the class-conflict desire that survives the calamitous revelation of the sibling relation between the protagonists Harrington and Harriot. Lust, violence, and democracy comprise a single thematic pull in the incestuous attraction of an aristocratic youth whose world collapses around the extramarital seduction committed by his father, a scandal Melville’s eponymous hero suffers with equal agitation. In *Pierre*, the marriage outrageously occurs after the sibling relation is discovered, for Pierre fakes a marriage with his half-sister Isabel in order to bring her into the family fold without revealing his father’s infidelity to his mother. Both stories begin with sentimental tendencies, then release themselves from the mandatory happily-ever-after, but always to the peril of all: between *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre*, there are six suicides, four premature deaths, and a murder.

Mothers, maidens, and marriages are still the staple motifs of both stories, but these fundamentals of sentimentality are often to blame for the nastiest violence in both novels, not just by bloodshed but also through narrative disintegration. Some of the most harrowing violence occurs against an illusion of narrative integrity that Brown and Melville set up only to dismantle, the idea being to present unstable genre play as the literary expression of a nation that resists class hierarchy and stable social roles. The unnatural union of brother and sister jars the reader, imposing an uncomfortable experience replicated by

the union of sensation and sentiment. Harrington and Pierre assimilate their deviant desires into a scheme of domesticity, a move that intersects the sensational with the sentimental in ways that insist on chaotic genre confusion. Their desires are neither restrained by chilling domestic prudery nor urged by the sultry prurience of libertinism. Rather, Harrington and Pierre revere their sisters and mothers by lusting after them. The resulting violence to genre stability signals a move toward a kind of writing that is too mutable to be categorized, that plays with the crossbreedings of genre. These two acts of authorship vigorously reimagine the architecture of the novel, telling the story of America as a romance that requires a mixture of narrative styles, bound together with tethers as variable and unstable as those that bind misguided, incestuous lovers. The romantic yearnings and distraught philosophical reveries that Harrington and Pierre indulge in as they act out this new world desire usher in an American notion of romance upheld by a language as mutable—and, as we shall see, as muted—as the domestic relationships it describes.

The variant vocabulary of feeling and romance in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America helps to explain this generic mutability. From the publication of Adam Smith's *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1759 to that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, America sought to define social feeling as that which would bring the new nation into being and sustain its new and often disorderly democracy.<sup>3</sup> Sympathy, a felt response to the other that creates a common perception of the world, also defines one's moral compass as a shared organ of the human anatomy, known as a sixth or moral sense, which was often considered the essential building block to an egalitarian social body.<sup>4</sup> As Kristin Boudreau has noted in *Sympathy in American Literature*, from its colonial beginnings, American literature reflected the notion that Americans were bound by close affinities in an attempt to erase their differences and create instead a shared social being (206). Founders of the republic understood the nation as a family and saw "the cultural fiction of a natural affection . . . a fiction that encouraged a belief in shared feelings even when 'consanguinity' remained only a metaphor" (x). An uncomfortable metaphor at best, consanguinity—experienced by the body but also by the body politic—marks the nervous erasure of difference in the interest of equality; the double sympathies of fraternity and marriage accomplish that "assimilation

of differences” in *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* at the cost of social and generic order.

In nineteenth-century American literature, the use of sympathy transformed from moral feeling to what Stowe would famously call the duty to “feel right,” and the sensational current of social feeling known as sympathy would seemingly be tamed into a domestic sentiment.<sup>5</sup> Yet beyond the sentimental novel’s surface engagement with cultivating innocence, a critical survey of recent work on this genre reveals that it is additionally defined by an uncomfortable thematic commingling of power, unauthorized desire, and family feeling.<sup>6</sup> Moving beyond the Tompkins-Douglas debate, critics are now invested in the unsteadiness of sentimental literature as it attempts to make sense of the agencies and desires of its domestic subjects.<sup>7</sup> The spectrum of definitions for sentimentality is a wide one; contemporary critics identify sentimentality as, on one side of the spectrum, a semideliberate, self-conscious social construction of emotion, and on the other side, an authentic enhancement of one’s humanity through intensely shared feelings.<sup>8</sup> At any place within this spectrum, there is also a notable dark side to be acknowledged, as sentimental works often link themes of self-destruction, erotic discipline, and the power of surveillance to formulations of agency and (often female) moral authority.<sup>9</sup>

As such a dark side makes clear, part of sentimentalism is feeling *wrong*, and we might say this is where sensationalism and sentimentalism mix; a willingness to participate in wrong feeling becomes a means of selfhood and community. Just as Stowe imagines “feeling right” as an act of doing good, feeling wrong is perceived as an act of wrongdoing. Sentimentalism’s conjoining of taboo and agency reflects upon this tension, for in the injunction to “feel right,” one often feels quite wrong, and the link to a shared humanity, at least in the incest romances by Brown and Melville, involves a disproportionate element of feeling very, very wrong. *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* linger upon the moment when the line between feeling right and feeling wrong blurs; they build up a generic chaos in order to attend to the liminal sympathies of incestuous lovers in whom the sentimental and sensational merge. Nothing is stable—domestic relationships fall apart, plot lines waver—but, even more unsettling, the style of the prose itself suffers one generic transformation after another. *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* troublingly allow this unconcealed syn-

thesis of the sensational and the sentimental to surface. Even accepting *The Power of Sympathy's* disjointed epistolarity and the shadowy authorial intrusions of *Pierre*, there is an element of cacophony in both books that is disturbing, a sense that no one gets the soapbox for long enough and that the last word is entirely up for grabs. This is especially disturbing when what is at stake is whether a man might permissibly be in love with his half-sister. There is no trustworthy narrator to carry us through the tumult of these two incest dramas, nor is there a single genre to organize them with any narrative stability. This instability reflects the kind of chaos feared in early America, a chaos determined by the erosion of status but, more important, also by the erosion of certainty. And *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* strenuously participate in this erosion.

Neither the gregariousness of sentimental feeling nor the heat of sensational action by themselves can aptly give a literary expression of the heart. This species of anti-novel, which attempts to express the heart as a democratic organ of feeling, springs from a rejection not of narrative but of generic integrity. The erosion of certainty is romantic, an allowance of infinite emotional possibility, and it presents the overflow of feeling from the incestuous body that is at once sensational and sentimental. It is a body that must be read differently, and the anti-novel in this narrow context means simply that the single-genre novel is not sufficiently able to tell the stories of the American romance in which lovers have so much to say that they sometimes cannot say anything at all. Their stutterings and silences rewrite traditional romance in a style to which we are unaccustomed; these texts adopt an approach that reinvests meaning in hackneyed sentimental words and the dramatic sensational angst of the early American romance.

American sensationalism and sentimentalism have been the subjects of definition and debate in much recent scholarship. Acts of incest, engaging as they do in both genres at once, become symbolic of generic turbulence in Brown's and Melville's work. These two texts do violence to the novel. But they also sustain this violence in a way that needs to be accounted for. The aggregate message sent through this mishmash of sensationalism and sentimentality creates an American romanticism whose only established tenet is the anti-novel's sublime experience of mutability in body, heart, and language itself.

### The American Politics of the Incest Romance

The ostentatious egalitarianism of both *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* marks the junction between incest and democracy and its particular meaning through the terms of the American romance. Harrington is originally cast as a somewhat ruthless seducer in his “scheme of pleasure,” which is to “remove this fine girl into an elegant apartment, of which she herself is to be the sole mistress.”<sup>10</sup> He never intends anything as lofty as marriage with Harriot, who is a servant and “has no father—no mother—neither is there aunt, cousin, or kindred of any degree who claim any kind of relationship to her.” With no cumbersome family line to predetermine her status, she is the ideal republican subject. Nevertheless, Harrington is too good for her and arrogantly declares, “I am not so much of a Republican as formally to wed any person of this class” (*PS*, 11). But his romantic feelings for her overwhelm him and quickly transform him from rake to rebel. He soon vows to marry her, claiming, “Inequality among mankind is a foe to our happiness.”<sup>11</sup> A sure convert to the principles of equality, Harrington unwittingly voices the need to return the sister to her family in a way that will destroy it. Romantic feeling thus becomes anti-institutional, a force that will democratize the nation with a vengeance, blinding it to the institution of family that sustains class difference. Pierre is similarly converted when Isabel’s status as an orphan and a seamstress opens the opportunity to reject stuffy aristocratic notions of rank and surname. Isabel says “‘I never knew a mortal mother’” and later claims, “‘The word father only seemed a word . . . it did not seem to involve any claims of any sort’” (*P*, 114, 145). As is the case with Harrington, in the space of a few chapters, Pierre’s passion for Isabel convinces him to shake off a planned aristocratic marriage to the wealthy Lucy in lieu of a staged union with an illegitimate sister of the lower classes.

*The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* are incest romances that explore the overlap between sensational and sentimental literature in order to expose the kind of heartfelt democracy the new nation at once seeks and fears. The pursuit of equality mutates into a call for sameness and finds an apt metaphor in incest, with orphans and aristocrats marrying only to discover that what brought them together was what Brown’s subtitle calls “the triumph of nature,” the draw of like to like. We thus witness in these two books the closing distance between equality

and sameness. In both texts there is a connection linking passionate love between equals to democratic passion about equality. Consider Harrington's speech of disquieted love when he writes of Harriot: "I walked to the window—my heart was on fire—my blood boiled in my veins—it is impossible to form an idea of the disorder of my nerves—*Harriot's* were equally agitated" (PS, 61).

Harrington's words read like a heady romantic liaison, but the passage looks quite different in its larger context of Harriot's diminished class status as the servant girl for her employer Mrs. Francis:

Mrs. *Francis* had intrusted *Harriot* with some trifling commission—It was not done—she had not had time to perform it. *Harriot* was reprimanded—Yes! by Heaven—this Mrs. *Francis* had the insolence to reprimand *Harriot* in my presence—I was mortified—I walked to the window—my heart was on fire—my blood boiled in my veins—it is impossible to form an idea of the disorder of my nerves—*Harriot's* were equally agitated—Mrs. *Francis* saw our confusion and retired—she left me so completely out of temper that I was forced to follow her example. I kissed away the tear from the cheek of *Harriot* and withdrew to my chamber. (PS, 61)

Except for the mention of insolence and reprimand, it is nearly impossible to distinguish this passage from that romantic liaison, and Brown seems to be making exactly that point. The need to view Harriot as a social equal is unmistakably romantic in the breathy, quixotic language of the suitor faced with his lover's insult. And Harrington's full about-face from aristocratic seducer to egalitarian fiancé strengthens this interpretation. The passions are explicitly democratizing mechanisms here, but they come at the cost of social ambiguity. Uncertainty is a central principle of democracy as Brown and Melville cast it: one cannot mark differences in ways that organize and stratify others and still sustain the equality of a democracy, but without those means, one cannot be sure his wife is not also his sister.

This disappearing distinction between equality and sameness has attracted several critics to inquire into the ubiquity and emblematic nature of incest in the literature of the new republic. Writers like Elizabeth Barnes see sympathy promoting a countertradition against individualism through its recognition of the "relational matrix at the center of identity" (39); sympathy creates a "blurring of ego boundaries" between self and other (33). Moreover, as Gillian Silverman



puts it in her reading of incest and *Pierre*, nineteenth-century sentimental literature “imagined social relations as familial in an attempt to encourage the sentimental project of unity or commonality of feeling. They projected social cohesion, in other words, by envisioning a world of shared genealogy.”<sup>12</sup> We witness this rhetoric of interpersonal relations in *Pierre*’s response to the moment of sibling attraction, a moment that presents an equally unconventional reassociation with family. Pierre prepares Isabel for his incestuous proposal of marriage when he declares, “I can not be an open brother to thee, Isabel. But thou wantest not the openness; for thou dost not pine for empty nominalness, but for vital realness; what thou wantest, is not the occasional openness of my brotherly love; but its continual domestic confidence. Do I not speak thine own hidden heart to thee?” (*P*, 192). Even when it means denying that the proposal is to a sister, Pierre’s democratic rejection of “empty nominalness”—the bankruptcy of a mere surname to bind people together rather than the “vital realness” of a felt bond—now counts as the interpersonal relation required to maintain a liberal democracy.

Both tales openly track their protagonists’ desires as the catalyst that democratizes them; Harrington and Pierre are described in radical terms that reveal the need for rebellion in American society against the family as the institution that safeguards class hierarchy, and the call to erode social distinctions comes from the impoverished sirens to whom they are related. In *Pierre*, the narrator poses a question in the very first chapter that sets up this disassembly of the family as a national project: “With no chartered aristocracy,” he asks, “how can any family in America imposingly perpetuate itself?” (*P*, 8). Then the narrator indulges in an odd treatise about what sets America apart from the “monarchical world” of peerage and inheritance in Europe. For several paragraphs, he waxes egalitarian as he describes the false aristocracy of England’s “Peerage Book” and even suggests that royal blood is but a “manufactured nobility” (*P*, 10). During a lengthy explanation of the American family, he says:

Certainly that common saying among us, which declares, that be a family conspicuous as it may, a single half-century shall see it abased; that maxim undoubtedly holds true with the commonality. In our cities families rise and burst like bubbles in a vat. For indeed the democratic element operates as a subtile [*sic*] acid among us; forever producing new things by corroding the old. (*P*, 8–9)

The hero of American literature thus requires a social demotion. Pierre will certainly have his day as one of “the commonality” instead of living on in the “richly aristocratic condition of Master Pierre Glendinning” (*P*, 12). Focusing on Pierre as he who will come to represent the corrosion of the old, the passage ends with a warning: “[W]e shall yet see again, I say, whether Fate hath not just a little bit of a word or two to say in this world” of the “glorious benediction to young Pierre,” and concludes, “Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse,”<sup>13</sup> implying, of course, that he who would become an aristocratic “god” in the new republic shall be taught a sound lesson (*P*, 14). Ultimately, like Harrington, Pierre will lose his ambition to preserve his own family like a great oak among blades of grass,<sup>14</sup> but the narrator duly cautions, “[Y]ou will pronounce Pierre a thorough-going Democrat in time; perhaps a little too Radical altogether to your fancy” (*P*, 13). There is a simultaneous impulse to erect and destroy families in *Pierre* that suggests a need for affective bonds outside the institution of the family, or, as Silverman puts it, incest in *Pierre* “does not constitute a rejection of the family but, rather, a fantasy of kinship in its ideal form. It is a means of depicting affective connection while simultaneously allowing for rupture and nonconformity” (356).<sup>15</sup>

The orphan is the ultimate democratizing force that challenges the superiority of family in a republic as one who only ever elects a family. As June Howard reminds us, in nineteenth-century American literature, family “becomes something people choose and in which people’s choices matter.” Similarly, Cindy Weinstein rethinks critical understandings of sympathy in the sentimental novel when she argues that “sympathy thrives in the absence of family ties” and that families are chosen in a shift from consanguinity to contract as the defining principle of kinship.<sup>16</sup> She insists that in *Pierre*, Melville sees “the radical origins of sentimental novels, which is to say that without the biological family in shards, they can’t work” (161). Sentimentalism actually moves away from biological family ties and toward contractually chosen ones (that is, marriage). What *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* promote through their incest romances, then, is less an argument for a democratic government and more an observation of the democratic condition, in which the erasure of hierarchy is enabled by feeling quite wrong.

### The First American Novel as Anti-novel

Questions of genre are linked with attempts to define this democratizing romance in both novels. In *The Power of Sympathy*, one of Harrington's earliest philosophical reveries strives to define the relationship between language and love that disparages the value of both. It is an odd moment, during which Harrington impossibly becomes the sentimental suitor pondering the shortcomings of sentimental language. To his sanctimonious friend Worthy, Harrington writes a letter about his "investigation" into the "nature" of love he feels for Harriot, whose relation to him has not yet been revealed. He accusingly begins, "You will tell me I am in love—What is love? I have been trying to . . . strip it of its mere term, and consider it as it may be supported by principle." His sad and somewhat cavalier conclusion is that "I might as well search for the philosopher's stone" (*PS*, 31). The starkly unromantic surface of Harrington's inquiry hardly quickens the pulse or rallies us behind the lover's resolve. We must remember, however, that his search is not for the sensation of love (already we have heard about his quickened pulse as he exhaustively describes the fine points of Harriot's beauty). Rather, his concern is for this sensation deprived of its "mere term." Just as the amorous longings of the noble suitor are staged, he scorns all those who would traffic in sentimental slop. He acerbically observes, "Every one is ready to praise his mistress—she is always described in her 'native simplicity,' as 'an angel' with a 'placid mein' 'mild, animated' 'altogether captivating.'" Such abusers of cliché admit, he reminds us, that "at length the task of description is given up as altogether 'undescribable.'" Harrington's last conjecture leaves no doubt as to his antagonism toward hackneyed appellations such as "altogether captivating" when he demands, "Are these not in themselves bare insignificant words? The world has so long been accustomed to hear the sound of them, that the idea is lost. But to the question, What is love? Unless it is answered now, perhaps it never will be" (*PS*, 31–32). Here begins the text's urgent call for a decisively *unaccustomed* language of romance. The first American novel's quest to right the wrongs of clichéd love seems too important to ignore. At stake is the loss of true love, of words that mean what they say, of the ability to express the most romantic feelings in ways that can really be heard.

In line with the overall generic instability of the novel, immediately preceding and then following this more disinterested query into the

nature of romantic language is Harrington's panegyric praise for Harriot's virtue and beauty, and the deliciously impenetrable mysteries of woman are conjured as powerfully here as anywhere. But this pause so early on in the novel, as Harrington considers the failures of sentimental language to put those impenetrable mysteries into words, offers an important argument regarding the confused genre of Brown's work. For in order to answer the question "What is love?" Harrington turns to the strange divide between earnestly heartfelt words and the stale principles they convey. The problem is not one between signifier or signified, and it is certainly not a problem of insufficient passion, but between how one feels and how a word is felt. This is a problem Harrington must share, for what but "bare insignificant words" does Brown—or America for that matter—have to preserve ideas of love and nation? The task of the text becomes clear: *The Power of Sympathy* must work to use language in such a way that romantic ideas are not lost.

This language emerges symbolically through silences, which at times convey sentimental principles through a sensational setting and at others sensational principles through a sentimental setting. Harrington stutters awkwardly when he is with Harriot, and in fact just about all of their encounters are characterized by strange silences. In the novel's first letter, for example, Harrington recounts meeting his "charmer," whose blush he translates into a forty-three word account of what he interprets as Harriot's inner longing to marry him. He takes serious umbrage at the "sordid, earth-born" idea that the "crimson drop" reddening her cheek might be mistaken for a mere "ordinary blush." Again distrusting "bare insignificant words," he summons "thou spirit of celestial language, that canst communicate by one affectionate look" more "than can be contained in myriads of volumes" (*PS*, 9–10). Yet neither Harriot nor Harrington actually says anything. Further, in an especially bizarre report of a later rendezvous, Harrington offers a minutely detailed description of a conversation with Harriot that he consequently admits he never actually had. "Not a syllable of it" was uttered. Harrington says that his "rebellious tongue refused to utter a word—it faltered—stammered—hesitated—." During what turns out to be a completely silent encounter, he vows to Harriot that he will make an honest woman out of her instead of seducing her, using "a language of the eyes" to propose marriage (*PS*, 14). The passage signals an "indescribable description"

in which the lover comes across as a wordless wooer, not just a man of few words, but a man of strictly imagined words. Certainly Harrington does not flinch at the sentimentality of this moment, a syrupy mixture of apostrophe and sweet chivalrous love. But this is a sensational love for his half-sister, whose blush is marked by the “crimson drop” of a shared bloodline, and she accepts the all-important proposal of marriage expressed through the body language of her impassioned pursuer. It seems strange that a novel relying on letters would devote so many pages to characters who cannot put their feelings into words. In a tale filled with uninterrupted, substantive exclamations (among others, “HARRIOT IS YOUR SISTER!” leaps to mind), why are there so many stutters and silences?

In this anti-novelistic world, the characters’ fear that ordinary language will fail them is a real one. Harrington’s irritation at the idea that Harriot’s blush might be misconstrued as “ordinary” is rightly placed: there are no ordinary blushes in a romance, nor, more to the point, should there be. There is no room in an exclamatory romance for the mundane (although perhaps the new republic, emerging out of an impassioned revolution, has every reason to long for it). Interruptive silences provide a textual space for the profane, the sentimental notion of “right feeling” turned into feeling wrong, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, between the wrong lovers, expressed with the wrong words or even no words at all.

Consider a few short passages in which Harrington and Harriot attempt to speak after the discovery of their sibling relation. Harrington describes the first such encounter to Worthy: “Here was all the horror of conflicting passions, expressed by gloomy silence—by stifled cries—by convulsions—by sudden floods of tears—The scene was too much for my heart to bear—I bade her adieu—my heart was breaking—I tore myself from her and retired” (*PS*, 80). Harrington soon confides to Worthy, “[M]y thoughts are broken—I cannot even think regularly” (*PS*, 81). These lovers, like the text itself, become characterized by silence and irregularity. *The Power of Sympathy* enhances our understanding of deep, tragic romance most successfully when “conflicting passions” find expression not in clarity but in ambiguous silence. Whatever it is that constitutes love, this anti-novel tells us by not telling us at all. The rejection of complete thoughts and full impassioned speeches about what they have lost amounts to an argument in answer to Harrington’s earlier question, “What is love?” For he soon

concludes that trite words hardly do justice to the feeling; as Brown develops his tale, he too seems to reject an ordinary use of words, often opting for none at all. Silence reigns when romance is too deeply felt, and there seems no generic niche for this kind of expression.

Later, after Harriot has died, essentially from the shock of it all, Harrington describes his lingering feelings for her:

Her eager solicitation—the anxiety she always expressed for me—When I think she is no more, it wrings my heart with grief, and fills my eyes with tears—

I MUST go— (*PS*, 92)

Her solicitation for what? What about her anxiety? Where and why must he go? Harrington rarely completes a thought. The gulfs between different thoughts say more than anything else; the broken thought expresses the sublime in the anti-novel. The pause comes to represent the rhetorical style of the anti-novel, the text that relies so heavily on dramatic plot turns and over-the-top prose only to back off because at the moment of crisis the best parts must be only insinuated.

Although Harrington's letters contain a barrage of sentences he cannot bear to finish, the sensational aspect of these fragments does not exactly leave us guessing. While it asks us to respond with strong feelings to tragedy, it does not ask us to "fill in the blanks," for in a sensational body there are none to be found. Such sensational silences mark the excess, not the deficit, of expression. There is rather too much to say, a gregariousness belonging to tragic, lustful, incestuous bodies. Marks on the page, broken sentences, body language, missing words, the spaces in which our epistolary characters scribble their meaning through omission: these moments depict the sensational and the sentimental as the unspoken but most emphatically not the unexpressed. Brown underscores this point as Harrington remarks, "How incompetent is the force of words to express some peculiar sensations! Expression is feeble when emotions are exquisite" (*PS*, 31). While it may be difficult to get more explicit than Harrington is here, surely we understand what he means. Expression is not feeble once its weakness is referenced. Awkward, staccato language articulates the sensational body, marking it on the page when ordinary words are too "feeble" to do so. Harrington self-consciously addresses the weaknesses of his words even as he traffics in the very language he distrusts so deeply. His words experience a kind of torsion (the tension

created by holding one end of an object motionless while twisting the other end); in these broken sentences, words like *love* come to mean something again, used alongside their traditional meanings. The survival of their love long past the revelation of their kinship allows for a fresh reading of romance; we can really hear words like *love* and *passion* when they are shared between siblings who cannot bear to say them aloud. The American romance, one might say, is best expressed through the unfinished sentence.

But what happens when the bulk of a novel is written in this way? In the novel's first letter, Harrington says he has been accused of being "a strange medley of contradiction—the moralist and the amoroso," the two elements, as he puts it, "interwoven in my constitution, so that nature and grace are at continual fisticuffs" (*PS*, 9). So, too, the text, for with all of its shifts between sentimental moralizing, sensational pronouncements, and metanarrative distress about the use of both, it reads something like a one-man brawl. The jarring dashes that mark romance through unfinished sentences further establish what a book that eschews "bare insignificant words" might be: an anti-novel. For the American writer, Brown insists, prose without unified voice or style, words without unified generic authority, offer the only way to solve Harrington's problem of a world too habituated to words of love. Undoubtedly *The Power of Sympathy* is a text divided against itself by distinct genres. As Cathy Davidson successfully argues in *Revolution and the Word*, the "division" in Brown's work "runs so deep that at times it almost seems as if we have two distinct and even contradictory discourses, a didactic essay and a novel, shuffled together and bound as one book. . . . Side by side with the didactic epistles . . . are quite different letters which, taken together, give us a salacious, sexually charged novel."<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Boudreau asserts that "*The Power of Sympathy* offers a heterogeneous view of the world, a conflict of voices that should complicate any assertion of a single meaning" (32).<sup>18</sup> Friends and relatives pander to the moral high ground of right feeling with exhausting regularity; preachy neighbors work themselves into lengthy patriotic frenzies; sibling lovers revel in lust and distress through a sea of exclamation points.

Yet the novel's pursuit of romance argues that we take this as a single book. Brown's anti-novel is not anti-narrative but an abrasive force resisting a single narrative authority. In answer to his vexing question about love, Harrington remarks that the graces of Harriot

“must not be taken severally—they cannot be contemplated in the abstract. If you proceed to a chymical analysis, their tenuous essence will evaporate—they are in themselves nothing, but the aggregate is love.” What he says next is an elegant metaphor for the totality of the anti-novel as well as for Harriot’s merits: “When an army composed of a great number of men, moves slowly on at a distance, nobody thinks of considering a single soldier” (*PS*, 32). What moves us is the relational. The letters and even the sentences of *The Power of Sympathy* might be usefully read through this metaphor, for “they are in themselves nothing,” but the aggregate is romance, that state of rhetorical fisticuffs in which love is located again and again.

Worthy finds the inscription of the lovers’ headstone (written by Harrington himself before his suicide) among Harrington’s “many loose papers,” another nicely crafted metaphor for the anti-novel. The text of that inscription reads like a sentimental poem, at least for a few lines. But as is the case elsewhere, generic inconsistencies abound. It begins:

Here rest their heads, consign’d to parent earth,  
Who to one common father ow’d their birth;  
Unknown this union—Nature still presides,  
And Sympathy unites, whom Fate divides. (*PS*, 102–3)

We switch from the peace and serenity of the safely unsexed, sentimental custodian “parent earth” to the sensational fact of their “one common father” with unease, compounded by the immeasurably ambiguous appearances of such abstractions as “Nature” and “Sympathy.” As Davidson notes, the inscription “dupliciously signals a moralistic novel that ultimately affirms an amoral universe—a novel that both believes *and* rests content in its disbelief” (*PS*, 109). Although Worthy (who has just married Harrington’s other sister Myra) irritatingly insists that the epitaph contains a “profitable moral,” it is not at all clear what that moral is. It is too palimpsestic, too interrupted, too much altogether. Unless, of course, we take it as an aggregate. We might follow that earlier piece of advice and refuse to consider a single soldier, or in this case, a single lover, not casting them as hollow, one-dimensional figures of sensational or sentimental significance who are “in themselves nothing” but instead as a community of romantic bodies whom nobody ought to consider singly. We must gather



the “loose papers” of this text and find the aggregate, the “unknown union” that is the American romance.

### Rural Bowl of Blood

While the first American novel is thus driven by ambiguity, its nineteenth-century “sequel” *Pierre* offers some generic upsets of its own. Promising Sophia Hawthorne a placid domestic tale, Melville privately billed *Pierre* as a guaranteed whaleless romance. “I shall not again send you a bowl of salt water,” he wrote to her. “The next chalice I shall commend, will be a rural bowl of milk.”<sup>19</sup> Critics have rightly noted the astonishing nature of this claim to mild-mannered domesticity, given that the novel ends with a murder followed by a triple suicide. One can hardly think of a less apt description for the ends met by Pierre, Isabel, and Pierre’s former fiancée, Lucy, when they kill themselves in the “granite hell” of Pierre’s prison cell, where he awaits execution after killing his own cousin with “mathematical intent.” “’Tis speechless sweet to murder thee!” Pierre cries out in a rage against his last living blood relative, as he pulls out two pistols and starts shooting (*P*, 361, 359).

Some bowl of milk. Yet the novel’s rift between sensational and sentimental language is sustained through even this bloody end. Pierre’s gloomy cell becomes a startling scene of domesticity, where the cold and dank prison seems to weep as “the stone cheeks of the walls were trickling” (*P*, 360). The prison guard refers to himself as the “housewife” of the place, and Pierre refers to death itself as a “midwife” (*P*, 361, 360). Earlier in the novel, echoes of the most recognizably sentimental prose of Melville’s time, from Susan Warner’s bestseller *The Wide, Wide World*, occur when Isabel makes her initial appeal for Pierre’s love. She writes to him, pleading, “Oh, my brother, my dear, dear Pierre,—help me, fly to me; see, I perish without thee;—pity, pity,—here I freeze in the wide, wide world” (*P*, 64). With her gothic black tendrils, her hauntingly fragile appearance, and her first speech act in the novel a piercing scream, Isabel would seem to be a frozen gothic stereotype in a sentimental landscape. She arrives at Saddle Meadows, where Pierre had been living out an excessively idyllic domestic fantasy, and she does not fit into the sentimental schema. Indeed, she does not so much arrive as appear, and her ghostly

entrance into the novel haunts the sentimental landscape with her personal gothic mystery.<sup>20</sup>

As readers of *Pierre* know, the novel begins with a strangled generic extremism—everything is hyperbolically sentimental. Pierre and his mother intimately refer to each other as “brother” and “sister”; his mother’s halting beauty seems to grace the Glendinning household with a bucolic aristocracy; Pierre himself is drawn to the preposterously innocent feminine virtues of his fiancée, Lucy; the characters address one another in bewildering “thees” and “thous” and speak in some mutation of an older English style. The hyperbole reveals the darker side of Saddle Meadows. Incestuous possibilities abound between Pierre and his mother, and Pierre is just at that awkward age of chasing windmills in search of the militaristic grandeur of his ancestors. Their uncomfortably tight, almost desperate grip on domesticity reads like an invitation to disaster.

When Isabel screams her way into *Pierre*, she might be said to literally call out for an unaccustomed language like that of Brown’s novel. It takes the ultrasentimental love of family and challenges us to really see it. The scream may be the most important speech act in *Pierre*. It is unquestionably the act of a sensational character, who nevertheless expresses true sentimental feeling when she recognizes her long-lost brother in the utmost of sentimental settings, a sewing bee of sorts where “a crowd of maidens” are working (*P*, 46). Before he sees her, Pierre hears the “sudden, long-drawn, unearthly, girlish shriek” (*P*, 45). The sound literally interrupts the novel. Although earlier in the chapter we learn that Pierre has had visions of a mysterious face that he now sees belongs to Isabel, the scream still officially unsettles everything for the first time. The scream recasts sentimental family feeling as sensational territory, the love for one’s family sounding out as horror. It is all, all too wrong that one would react to one’s long-lost family with an unearthly shriek, and this mutation of genre expectations initiates a pattern of mutability in *Pierre*. Once recovered, Isabel sits silently sewing, stealing sideways glances at Pierre, whom she knows to be her half-brother. Pierre does not know of her identity but is attracted to the mystery of her, a woman whose face had haunted him in his dreams, and he attempts a sly move toward her to “hear, if possible, an audible syllable from one whose mere silent aspect had so potentially moved him.” Pierre himself is gripped by silence when his mother confronts him afterward about his strange reaction to the

scream: "Why were you so silent, and why now are you so ill-timed in speaking?" she demands (*P*, 47). Pierre's inability to speak in this moment echoes Isabel's inability to speak in *Pierre*; her scream is the first infantile entrance of a fast-maturing presence of sensationalism. Isabel suitably waits for him in silence, writing him a letter after he leaves the scene.

The following description of her letter continues to draw a parallel to the novel itself. The narrator says that Isabel's note is "inscribed in . . . a[n] irregular hand, and in some places almost illegible" (*P*, 64). *Pierre* itself is written in an irregular hand, trafficking as it does in the most sentimental language of Melville's day. Lines such as "Love is both Creator's and Savior's gospel to mankind; a volume bound in rose-leaves, clasped with violets, and by the beaks of humming-birds printed with peach-juice on the leaves of lilies" (*P*, 34) just do not seem to be composed by the same metanarrative hand that later declares his reader "can now skip, or read and rail for himself" the following section of his own novel (*P*, 210). Yet even the excess of hyphens and all those "thees" and "thous" alongside more modern language suggest a drive to unusual conjoinings. There is a generic illegibility at work here. The generic determinism of narrative voice can no longer be counted on in *Pierre*, whose narrator offers delicacy and brutality, domestic bliss and prison madness, in the same breath.

Reading Isabel's letter, Pierre observes that its tear-soaked ink resembles blood. He finds it is "stained . . . with spots of tears, which chemically acted upon by the ink, assumed a strange and reddish hue—as if blood and not tears had dropped upon the sheet" (*P*, 64–65). He rips it in two. Like Harrington's loose papers, the torn letter represents a generic instability. Ink turns tears into blood, a telling metaphor for the tale's unstable shifts between the sentimental currency of tears and the more sensational motif of blood. Upon Isabel's arrival, *Pierre* experiences a generic rift; like the letter, *Pierre* itself seems torn, written in an irregular hand that has sentiment and sensation, "the moralist and the amoroso," as Harrington says, at "continual fisticuffs." Like *The Power of Sympathy*, *Pierre* is forcefully unsure of its genre: in addition to a sensational tale of seduction, incest, suicide, and murder, it is also partly a domestic idyllic, a philosophical pamphlet, a didactic essay, and a political tract on the corrosive American class system, with several lapses into epistolarity and authorial intrusion. These incongruities are enhanced by the overtaxed sentimental-

ism of the novel's first chapters, paralleled by Pierre's own schmaltzy poetry and his later failure to become a serious writer.

A survey of critical study on *Pierre* shows that just about all its readers feel pressed to address this genre question in one way or another. According to this mob of scribbling critics, *Pierre* is everything from autobiography to satire. Hershel Parker famously characterized *Pierre* as Melville's autobiographical rampage revealing his personal failures as a publishable writer. More recently, critics have attempted to defend *Pierre* by redefining Melville's purpose in writing it. Sacvan Bercovitch writes that it is a "rich and intricate piece of rhetoric, perhaps more intricate than necessary," that represents "Melville's American apocalypse."<sup>21</sup> David Reynolds reads it as a pop-culture jumble,<sup>22</sup> and many critics have grappled with the sentimental presence in *Pierre*: Anne Dalke calls it "an attack on the female sentimental mode."<sup>23</sup> Samuel Otter writes that it is "a sentimental text taken to the *n*th degree,"<sup>24</sup> and John Seeyle calls it an antisentimental embrace of "outcasts and renegades" fit less for domesticity than urban ruin.<sup>25</sup> Beverly Hume sees Pierre as an attempt to "kill (at least metaphorically) sentimentalism."<sup>26</sup> For Michael Paul Rogin it is a "bourgeois family nightmare" in which Melville's "self-parodying language calls attention . . . to the text as a construction."<sup>27</sup> It is a "revisionist domesticity . . . based on fraternity rather than marriage," according to Wyn Kelley.<sup>28</sup> Or as Jennifer DiLalla Toner rather colorfully puts it, *Pierre* is an attempt to undo the genre of life writing with a book that deliberately fails to fit in with his other, saltier works, a "critique of American life writing" as "the bastard child" of the Melville canon.<sup>29</sup> Nancy Fredricks adds, "Whether Melville means for us to take . . . anything he writes in *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* at face value is an important question for every reader of the book to consider."<sup>30</sup> A personal favorite remains *Day-Book's* 1852 review of *Pierre*, headlining "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY."

From this critical din emerges Otter's inspiring observation: "The story *is* bizarre, and one does look forward to perusing the entries in the literary contest to 'Describe the Plot of *Pierre* in Ten Sentences or Less.'"<sup>31</sup> Perhaps this is such an attractive bid because to do so hinges upon that irksome genre question. Is the plot of *Pierre* a story of a man who elopes with his half-sister, or is it a story of how and why Melville moves backward from sentiment to sensation in order to tell us about it? Why is it so hard to summarize this novel?

In response, we might pause first to remark that the reason *Pierre* is so concerned with bad writing and beleaguered writers has less to do with Melville's personal authorial struggle than with the asphyxiating conditions of the eighteenth-century English seduction novel that *Pierre* and *The Power of Sympathy* resist.<sup>32</sup> They arduously participate in the breakdown of genre by borrowing haphazardly from that story line and altering its most fundamental plotlines: seduction (but without force), murder (but without injustice), and incest (but without disgust). Here is no *Clarissa*, no family ripped apart by fraternal malice and parental tyranny, and above all, no unwilling prudes failing to escape from it all. In *Pierre* and *The Power of Sympathy*, libertinism occurs in house and is met with considerable interest; the sentimental sweethearts of *Pierre* and *The Power of Sympathy* mix their purity with sensational leanings toward incestuous desires. Sensational behavior from sweet abandoned orphans and angelic beauties experiments with the mutability of genre stereotypes in a way that broadens the potential of American writing.<sup>33</sup> In *Pierre*, the trouble is therefore not about the forceful intrusion of the libertine but about a much more unusual intruder: the sentimental woman.

For if anyone is the villain here, surely it is Lucy. Indeed, we might say that Lucy invades *Pierre*. Lucy is the fair-haired domestic angel driven half mad by Pierre's unexplained break from their engagement. She has no idea that Isabel is Pierre's half-sister and is devastated when her relationship with him is abruptly broken off by his astounding announcement that he has married someone else. When Pierre and Isabel flee to the city, Lucy disappears from the novel for several chapters, her work seemingly finished. For the early part of the novel she plays the role of the sentimental sweetheart, described in such quintessentially sentimental language that she practically floats away when Pierre dares to look at her. Admiring her beauty, Pierre absurdly observes "that she could only depart the house by floating out of the open window, instead of actually stepping from the door," being of such "unearthly evanescence" (*P*, 58). But this "airy" figure returns, showing up at the doorstep of the dank urban squalor to which Isabel and Pierre retreat after their banishment from Pierre's home, appearing decidedly out of place. And she ruins everything.

But that is entirely the point. The reentrance of the sentimental woman into the sensational setting of *Pierre*'s second half further confounds the novel's genre. Lucy's own generic instability reinforces

*Pierre's* status as an anti-novel. Just as Pierre's sister settles into her role as his "wife," his former fiancée (whom he called "sister" during their engagement) returns as his "cousin." This heavenly wisp of a girl makes her comeback not in the role of the sentimental angel but instead playing the part of yet another incestuous lover. She writes Pierre before her arrival and in her missive she proposes to resume their courtship in spite of Pierre's marriage to Isabel (which Lucy believes is a legitimate marriage). "Let it seem," she writes, "as though I were some nun-like cousin immovably vowed to dwell with thee in thy strange exile." With the curtain to their intentions thus drawn, she argues, they might practice a "mute wooing of each other, with no declaration; no bridal" until death do they part (*P*, 310). When Lucy invades the novel in her second entrance into Pierre's life, it is as his incestuous yet chaste cousin. The combination of these two qualities in Lucy is another incongruous aggregate, her new role defined by the pursuit of a desire too deviant to ever realistically satisfy; further, the genre of the text able to tell such a story relies on silent wooing: like *The Power of Sympathy*, *Pierre* turns to silences whose cost is generic instability. There are no demographic niches, no stereotypes to stabilize the narrative, not even consistency within characters. Melville's recasting of Lucy as a sensational figure turns novel into novelty, and the mutability of this text disrupts all the narrative rules. In some ways we might therefore read Lucy an icon of this anti-novel, for in order to pursue the mutability of narrative, one needs a truly mutable character. Isabel is a radical figure indeed, with her strange speeches and her patchwork memory of the past, but Lucy's switch from innocent maiden to incestuous madwoman represents an extreme mutability. In pursuit of romance, *Pierre* transforms its angel of the house into an incestuous wooer. What else might she, or the others for that matter, then become?

Seeking an answer to that question forces us to consider that the characters of *Pierre* act out their desires in ambiguous silences. Along with *The Power of Sympathy*, most sensational acts in this novel are "speechless sweet," as when Pierre murders his cousin Glen Stanly, when Isabel and Pierre stand "hushed" in a particularly incestuous moment, and when Isabel uses the guitar to tell a story she cannot bear to finish in what Brown might call "bare insignificant words." At each novel's generically unstable moments, silence reigns. This business of "mute wooing" between Lucy and Pierre parallels Harrington's stut-

tering advances toward Harriot in *The Power of Sympathy*. Both novels approach romance through unfinished sentences and unspoken affections. Isabel repeatedly demands, "Do not speak to me," when she and Pierre first meet; in a beautifully postmodern passage (which is also perhaps the strangest liaison in the history of Western literature), she insists instead on playing her guitar: "Now listen to the guitar," she demands, "and the guitar shall sing to thee the sequel of my story; for not in words can it be spoken" (*P*, 126). This is the work of the anti-novel: to reanimate the language of romance through insinuation rather than utterance. As William Spanos has argued, silence functions in *Pierre* to articulate a postmodern unsayability "that constitutes Melville's most revolutionary legacy."<sup>34</sup> Isabel's proposal that music will tell her story of woe is an instance of the sensational couched in that weirdly archaic sentimental language of the "thees" and "thous." As Fredricks points out, the "nonrepresentational art of music served as a refuge for those interested in exploring the limits of representation"; when Isabel uses music to tell her story, "[t]he 'inadequacy' of language functions negatively to represent that which is beyond representation. The words skim the surface of the text as the passions burn beneath" (95).<sup>35</sup> Isabel insists in her second interview with Pierre, "Not mere sounds of common words, but inmost tones of my heart's deepest melodies should now be audible to thee" (*P*, 113). The sensational dashes in *The Power of Sympathy* and Isabel's guitar thus work with the unutterable rather than abandoning it.

When Pierre suggests to Isabel that they ought to pretend to be married so they can stay together, he proposes a "mute wooing" similar to that proposed by Lucy. When he suggests that their relationship has not been fettered by social inequalities, Pierre asks Isabel if her heart does not truly desire this radical solution. It is a dramatic scene for the two: "Call me brother no more! . . . I am Pierre, and thou Isabel, wide brother and sister in the common humanity, no more," declares Pierre. How will they accomplish this new relation? "One way—one way—only one! A strange way, but most pure." Pierre seeks to replace sibling relation with a more abstract kind of democratic brotherhood, and like the novel's narrator, who pontificates for several pages on the corrosive, mutable nature of the American class system in which no family reigns with an aristocratic status for very long, Pierre wishes to exploit the volatility of American society to alter the rules of romance. The intensity of this erotic incestuous moment peaks when, as Pierre

whispers this “most pure” solution to Isabel, “his mouth wet her ear.” After an unnamed “terrible self-revelation” strikes Pierre (presumably his first consciously incestuous desire), our narrator notes that “they changed; they coiled together, and entangledly stood mute” (*P*, 192).

Naturally one tends to settle on the wet ear as what is principally erotic about this passage. Certainly wetting a sister’s ear stands out as a critical departure from strictly fraternal affection, common humanity or no. But this business would unquestionably suffer less disgrace if Pierre had simply, practically, and above all *audibly* made the suggestion that as zany as it sounds, a faked marriage presented the only way for them to stay together. It is the whisper that stigmatizes the moment.<sup>36</sup> It is that which we refrain from speaking that becomes the unspeakable, and *Pierre* knows this as well as *The Power of Sympathy*. A throng of mute lovers populating both novels and the shocking conclusions they can only intimate partly make for good drama. These two texts nevertheless make it the task of drama to represent the unspeakable by eschewing rules of genre. When these lovers come undone, so do their stories.

In her insightful reading of Melville’s use of language, Weinstein further explores the unraveling of *Pierre* by skillfully connecting the repetition and relatedness of words in Melville’s text with consanguineous ruin: “The words in *Pierre* act very much like the novel’s characters, incapable of doing much more than repeating, mirroring or descending from themselves” (163). As she points out, “The words, like virtually all the characters in the novel, are related to each other, which is tantamount to a death sentence in the world of *Pierre*” (166). The result is an entangled family tree of etymology and aristocracy, and the goal is to conquer the menace of biological ties by killing off the family of Glendinnings and the language representing their solipsistic, incestuous world (165). Certainly the relatedness of words and people creates greater instability, and, as Weinstein argues, this instability is an attempt to destabilize the biological family.<sup>37</sup> Or, as Silverman puts it, “Melville would seem to recapitulate the crime of incest in his very language” through “his insistence on pairing the unpairable” (351). She continues, “Melville’s linkage of incest with original authorship . . . celebrates both social and aesthetic nonconformity. . . . [I]ncest, for Melville, paradoxically presents the possibility of newness and rupture” (347–48).



When Harriot laments the discovery of her blood tie to Harrington, she too finds herself unable to speak it. "Amidst the struggle of passion," she wonders, "how could I pronounce the word—how could I call you by the title of brother. True—I attempted to articulate the sound, but it died upon my tongue." In this deathbed scene of woe and regret, Brown finally condenses their tragedy into what cannot be spoken. Harriot writes a letter to Harrington after the revelation of their relation in which dashes abound, and her own passions are so unstable that it is all she can do to force herself to recall that Harrington is in fact her brother. "I strive no longer to remember our present connexion," she confesses, adding, "my hand refuses to trace the word" *brother*. She attaches the couplet:

\_\_\_\_\_The name appears  
 Already written; blot it out my tears! (*PS*, 87)

Here, as with Isabel's letter, Harriot's letter fuses the blood tie with sentimental tears, profoundly failing to make the very word *brother* illegible. The unspoken *brother* carries more pathos and eros this way, and we hear it as a word sensual, familial, unjust. This rhetorical standoff continues as Harriot boldly describes what it is like for her to know that the body she still desires is her half-brother's: "I curse the idea of a brother. . . . I view you in two distinct characters: If I indulge the idea of one, the other becomes annihilated, and I vainly imagine I have my choice of a brother or—" (*PS*, 87–88). Pierre's own vain imaginings, namely that he can choose to recast his sister as his wife and his fiancée as his cousin, are a similar indulgence culminating in unheard whispers and overdetermined silences. These two texts use such silences, dashes, and unfinished sentences as the mutable last word; the unspoken romantic condition finds no genre to do its work; the American anti-novel gives voice to unspeakable desires, to the mutability of love, social roles, and language itself. Perhaps what is most powerful and romantic about such wordless moments in both texts is the use of silence to address the other. If the joint project of *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* is to seek out an answer to Harrington's question "What is love?" with "unaccustomed words," then these texts suggest very ordinary words indeed, but *only* suggest them. Where the sentence is broken, where silence intervenes, these are the moments that convey the most romantic ideas to us. Words like *love* come to mean something again when the other is addressed in a dash,

a whisper, an unfinished sentence. The attempt of both anti-novels to represent romance thus comes somewhat to resemble the Zen notion of the sound that makes no sound, the clapping of a single hand.

The incongruities of *Pierre's* narrator assemble an even more radical silence. When Pierre and Isabel load up a carriage and head for the city, the narrator dwells on the merits of silence. These narrative intrusions come from an eager if peculiar commentator, who surfaces at irregular intervals to remark upon, among other things, Pierre's sentimental battle with free will and the nature of authorship in America. There is really no way to describe just how weird these intrusions are, how eclectic the narrator's interests appear to be, or how absolutely disruptive his appearances become.<sup>38</sup> In this quiet scene, as Pierre and Isabel move to the city, the narrator is not satisfied to tell us that the carriage ride was cloaked in silence; nor is he even able to softly dramatize the silence with a simple metaphor. Instead, he overstates the case, pronouncing that silence is "the general consecration of the universe, . . . the most harmless and the most awful thing in all nature," that which "speakes of the Reserved Forces of Fate." Concluding in grandiose style, he closes the paragraph with the line, "Silence is the only Voice of our God" (*P*, 204). Silence abets the anti-novel; like Harrington's "undescrivable description," *Pierre's* loquacious narrator describes what he cannot in print fully accomplish. He chattily insinuates silence. This move is perhaps all that is possible; one must use many words in order to accomplish the unspoken. The narrator disregards narrative consistency and order, but he does so with remarkable clarity, inviting us to see what this text is up to, and what it is up to is that which it cannot *say*.

In the chapter titled "Young America in Literature," *Pierre's* narrator tells us that rather than abide by the two conventional modes of storytelling—linear or thematic—he would rather go his own cavalier way: "I elect neither of these; I am careless of either; both are well enough in their way; I write precisely as I please" (*P*, 244). If *The Power of Sympathy* is an anti-novel whose disjunctive parts must be taken in aggregate, then *Pierre* asks that we do so in the face of a narrator who admits there is no particular structure to his tale. Here we approach the idea of a silence that insinuates meaning—romance outside the jurisdiction of genre. As Harrington similarly claims before his suicide, "Let [the world] judge of my conduct. I despise its opinion—

Independency of spirit is my motto—I think for myself” (*PS*, 95). Our protagonists—be they silent wooers or loquacious narrators—relish a freedom from conventions that allows language to operate on a different level. Just as Harrington earnestly expresses his independence from convention, *Pierre*’s narrator discovers that what suits his story best is a generic mutability in which he may somewhat whimsically direct the spotlight at hummingbird beaks, bloody prison suicides, and even himself. Thus, when Parker, attempting a damning critique of *Pierre*, writes that Melville reveals “a deep draining off of his control over the relationship between narrator and reader,” one cannot but think, yes, *exactly*. The unseemly fusion of sentiment and sensation, like that of brother and sister, requires the molten instability of a text lacking a single genre. This is formal and thematic incest, a violation that attends to genre and narrative, and in the end this may be stranger than the sibling marriage. Inconstant and evasive, the authorial presences in *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* craft a revolutionary absence of control between narrator and reader. Barnes argues that incest is “the ‘natural’ consequence of American culture’s most deeply held values” that present “the relational matrix at the center of identity” in a nation bent on sympathetic unions;<sup>39</sup> Terry Eagleton describes incest as a “mingling of identity and otherness.”<sup>40</sup> It is also an appropriate symbol for the mixture of languages at the center of these American anti-novels. As Barnes says, incest is a fitting emblem for loving one’s sympathetic object—in essence, familiarizing the other—but we might also say it is about how romantic language facilitates even the most repugnant of pairings, and about how an unaccustomed language can achieve such an impossible romance through an aggregate collection of silences and unspeakable desires.

As a young man struggling with the shambles of what he once considered the serene moral high ground of Saddle Meadows, Pierre finds himself in search of that language when he exclaims, “The heart! the heart! ’tis God’s anointed; let me pursue the heart!” (*P*, 91). Indeed, *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre* pursue the heart with heated philosophical urgency. In neither text is the heart to be found in accustomed words. The language of the heart, practiced as it is in *The Power of Sympathy* and *Pierre*, operates to complicate and entangle genre. The confusion of genres is at its essence an American gesture toward a romance without a center, without a structure or hierarchy, even,

occasionally, without words. It is finally as “wordless wooers” that these texts approach us, and our speechlessness in the face of such artistic rebellion ought to speak louder than words.

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### Notes

- 1 Leonard Tennenhouse, “Libertine America,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11 (fall 1999/2000): 5.
- 2 Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1999), 244. Further references to *Pierre* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *P*.
- 3 See, for example, Kristin Boudreau’s *Sympathy in American Literature* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2002) for some examples of this influence. Boudreau notes that because it was widely read in America, Smith’s work is considered relevant to early American political and philosophical thought.
- 4 In *Sympathy in American Literature*, Boudreau offers a comprehensive study of the definitions of sympathy in early American literature and culture. She analyzes the significance of community formation in the new nation based on the troubled erasures and eruptions of difference in the attempt to “assimilate difference into common heritage” (206). See especially the chapters “Introduction: Popular Literature and the Uses of Sympathy” (1–17) and “The Regulation of Sensibilities in the Early Republic” (18–48).
- 5 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852; reprint, New York: Norton, 1994). As Stowe so famously wrote, “There is one thing that every individual can do, they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (385).
- 6 See, for example, Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000); June Howard, *Publishing the Family* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2001); Cindy Weinstein, *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004); and Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997). More detailed discussion of these works follows.
- 7 The major rift between estimating what Jane Tompkins calls the “cultural work” of sentimental fiction (in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986])

in many ways contradicts Ann Douglas's claim (in *The Feminization of American Culture* [New York: Avon Books, 1977]) that the saccharine sentimentalism produced by female and male writers of the American nineteenth century participated in and in part oversaw the "feminization" of the American arts (understood pejoratively as a movement relatively bankrupt of intellectual gravitas).

- 8 For instance, Howard defines sentimentality as "a moment when emotion is *recognized* as socially constructed" that was first used in nineteenth-century American literature "as a mode of embodied thought that enabled connection and entailed humanitarian concern for others" (*Publishing the Family*, 219, 235). Further, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon writes in "Sentimental Aesthetics" that "sentimentalism links the capacity of individuals to feel deeply (often, to suffer) to an essential, shared humanity" (*American Literature* 76 [September 2004]: 500).
- 9 In *Masochistic Pleasures*, Noble establishes an intersection between the ideal "noncorporeal woman" and a Puritanical longing for punishment as a means to subjectivity, where "metonyms for intimacy—discipline, surveillance, death, abjection, compulsion—can also function as expressions of eros" (61, 53). Noble furthers her case when she says that "when one's constructed identity abjects the body and physical passion, fantasies of pain enable one to imagine the ecstasies of unmaking that repressive subjectivity, without experiencing its agonies" (143).
- 10 William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy; or, The Triumph of Nature* (1789; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1996), 11–12. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *PS*.
- 11 Boudreau also finds this move to egalitarian love in *The Power of Sympathy* when she notes that the novel "elevates sensibility above class, education, wealth, or family" and adds that in the case of Harrington, his love for Harriot "[inaugurates] an American tradition of egalitarianism through sympathy" and "sentimental classlessness" (*Sympathy in American Literature*, 3).
- 12 Gillian Silverman, "Textual Sentimentalism: Incest and Authorship in *Pierre*," *American Literature* 74 (June 2002): 355.
- 13 Literally, the phrase means, "No one can do anything against God but God himself."
- 14 The metaphor is Melville's: "The grass is annually changed; but the limbs of the oak, for a long term of years, defy that annual decree. And if in America the vast mass of families be as the blades of grass, yet some few there are that stand as the oak; which, instead of decaying, annually puts forth new branches" (*Pierre*, 9).
- 15 Silverman adds context to this claim when she says, "Melville's fantasy of incest in *Pierre* involved a reimagining of familial relations as shifting and liminal. Thinking of the mother as the sister or of the sister as the wife, in other words, became a way to contest the regimented, compulsory

- identities that were ossifying around and within the antebellum nuclear family. But to posit incest as merely that which Melville embraced in the face of the repressive Victorian family is to miss the extent to which Melville imagined the family as itself already incestuously configured" ("Textual Sentimentalism," 353).
- 16 Howard, *Publishing the Family*, 114; Weinstein, *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy*, 1. See also Jay Fliegelman's *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority 1750–1800* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), in which he argues that the new republic shifted from a patriarchal to a paternalistic family structure, with a growing emphasis on voluntarism and contractual, elected relationships like marriage both socially and politically.
  - 17 Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 99.
  - 18 However, Boudreau also declares that in *The Power of Sympathy*, "some opinions emerge more dominant than others" and "characters speak the language of internal surveillance" that echoes the ideology of the day voiced by popular philosophers of moral feeling such as Benjamin Rush, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Smith (*Sympathy in American Literature*, 32).
  - 19 "The Life and Works of Herman Melville," Multiverse, [www.melville.org/letter8.htm](http://www.melville.org/letter8.htm) (accessed 7 July 2008).
  - 20 For more on the generic overlaps between gothic and sensational literature in *Pierre*, consider Robert Miles's "'Tranced Griefs': Melville's *Pierre* and the Origins of the Gothic," *ELH* 66 (spring 1999): 157–77.
  - 21 Sacvan Bercovitch, "How to Read Melville's *Pierre*," in *Herman Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Myra Jehlen (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1994), 118, 124.
  - 22 David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988).
  - 23 Anne French Dalke, "The Sensational Fiction of Hawthorne and Melville," *Studies in American Fiction* 16 (autumn 1988): 195.
  - 24 Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 209.
  - 25 John Seeyle, "*Pierre*, *Kavanaugh*, and the Unitarian Complex," in *Melville's Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays*, ed. John Bryant and Robert Milder (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1997), 386.
  - 26 Beverly A. Hume, "Of Krakens and Other Monsters: Melville's *Pierre*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 6 (June 1992): 95–108.
  - 27 Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983): 166.
  - 28 Wyn Kelley, "*Pierre*'s Domestic Ambiguities," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 107.

- 29 Jennifer DiLalla Toner, "The Accustomed Signs of the Family: Rereading Genealogy in Melville's *Pierre*," *American Literature* 70 (June 1998): 237–63.
- 30 Nancy Fredricks, *Melville's Art of Democracy* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1995), 77.
- 31 Otter, *Melville's Anatomies*, 174.
- 32 Or, as Otter has argued, we might instead say that *Pierre* moves through genres successively: "The book begins with the allure of the 'Sentimental' Lucy, moves through the 'Gothic' mysteries of Isabel, and climaxes in the striving, mutilated torso of the 'Romantic' Pierre. In this movement . . . Melville recapitulates the previous century of British and American literary history." Otter then concludes that the "emotional excess in *Pierre*" is "produced not by a lack of referents but by an infinitely involved series of referents" to literary genres (*Melville's Anatomies*, 243).
- 33 As Silverman argues, "In the context of antebellum bourgeois culture, where exogamous relations served to reproduce white middle-class homogeneity, incest" shows "the tricky territory between originality and sociality" ("Textual Sentimentalism," 347–48).
- 34 William V. Spanos, "Pierre's Extraordinary Emergency: Melville and 'the Voice of Silence,'" part 2, *boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 28 (fall 2001): 133–55; quotation 149. Spanos's argument delves into the trope of silence as "learning not simply to refuse to be answerable to the *saying* of the imperial First World but to turn that refusal—that thunderous silence—into an effective emancipatory practice" (151); his work is interested in the postmodern "non-being" that "haunts the dominant discourse of Being" in (non)exceptionalist American writing. His notion that silence in *Pierre* allows for a kind of resistance to (via an acknowledgment of) the utterances of dominant imperialist culture would place the anti-novel, I think, as a postmodern project.
- 35 Fredricks offers a discussion of Isabel's political marginalization and argues that the "nonrepresentational art of music in *Pierre* functions as an aesthetic analogue to Isabel's political unrepresentedness, that is, her marginal status in the socioeconomic power structure" (*Melville's Art of Democracy*, 87). Fredricks notes that the music in *Pierre* finds its generic roots in melodrama, in which music replaced speech "as an indicator of that which lies beyond representation" (98).
- 36 Pierre says, "But where one can not reveal the thing itself, it only makes it more mysterious to write round it in this way." Otter reacts to this line by noting that sentimental euphemism and the like in *Pierre* do not "evade" the body but "shape Pierre's desire." He adds, "Writing round it, circling the object of desire, defining it asymptotically—*Pierre* explores such intensifying effects" (*Melville's Anatomies*, 244).
- 37 Weinstein's captivating argument is that the sentimental novel's prerequisite is the disintegration of the biological family because "sympathy thrives in the absence of family ties" (*Family, Kinship, and Sympathy*, 1).

- 38 Many critics have written at length about the role of the narrator in *Pierre*. In relation to the question of writing, Rogin argues that Melville's presence in the novel's second half is an anarchic one that dismantles the differences among Melville, Pierre, and the narrator. "[A]s we grow more convinced that Pierre's voice is contaminated, the narrator's dissolves into it. This confusion . . . mirrors a deeper, more disturbing breakdown of boundaries, those that separate the author from his text" (*Subversive Genealogy*, 178).
- 39 Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, xi, 39.
- 40 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford, Eng.: Blackwell, 2003), 164.