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## Chapter 1

# Hawthorne's life

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Born on the Fourth of July in 1804, Nathaniel Hawthorne ranks with Herman Melville, Henry James, and Mark Twain among the best nineteenth-century American male novelists. Hawthorne grew up in Salem, Massachusetts, and Puritan history provided him with the background for many of his later fictional works, such as “The Gentle Boy” (1832), “Alice Doane’s Appeal” (1835), “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” (1836), “The Man of Adamant” (1837), “Endicott and the Red Cross” (1838), and of course *The Scarlet Letter* (actually set in Boston during the 1640s). In this novel of a Puritan community’s marking and punishing of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne provided us with a reference point for understanding many twentieth-century examples of scapegoating and social ostracism.

Hawthorne’s sea-captain father died at sea when he was only four, and he was raised by his mother and her family, the Mannings. When his mother moved to Raymond, Maine, in 1819, he stayed in Salem with his uncle’s family and did not see her for two years. He entered Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, in the fall of 1821 at the age of seventeen. He was not a stellar student. Shortly after his matriculation, he wrote his uncle William that the “Laws of the College are not at all too strict, and I do not have to study near so hard as I did in Salem” (15: 155). Hawthorne did find some rules “repugnant” – especially those involving religion. He resented having to “get up at sunrise every morning to attend prayers,” although he noted that the students “make it a custom” to break that law “twice a week.” “But worst of all,” he told his sister Louisa, “is to be compelled to go to meeting every Sunday, and to hear a red hot Calvinist Sermon from the President, or some other dealer in fire and brimstone” (15: 159). Hawthorne found other rules less strict, but they did catch up with him. In May 1822, he had to write his mother that he had been caught playing cards and had been fined fifty cents (15: 171). Since some of the card players were suspended, Hawthorne appears to have gotten off lightly, the college president apparently believing, Hawthorne later noted, that he had been led “away by the wicked ones.” In this, Hawthorne boasted to Louisa, “he is greatly mistaken. I was full as willing to play as the person he suspects

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of having enticed me, and would have been influenced by no one. I have a great mind to commence playing again, merely to show him that I scorn to be seduced by another into anything wrong" (15: 174). Hawthorne graduated from Bowdoin in the summer of 1824. Like a lot of students then and now, he had formed no particular plans for his post-graduate life. In his last letter from Bowdoin he reflected philosophically on his college experience and his prospects:

The family had before conceived much too high an opinion of my talents, and had probably formed expectations, which I shall never realise [sic]. I have thought much upon the subject, and have finally come to the conclusion, that I shall never make a distinguished figure in the world, and all I hope or wish to do is to plod along with the multitude. (15: 194)

Hawthorne undoubtedly underplays what he had learned at Bowdoin. His first novel *Fanshawe* derived from his college experience and confirmed him in the profession of authorship he had tentatively marked out for himself before he matriculated. "I have not yet concluded what profession I shall have," he wrote his mother in March 1821. Being a minister sounded too "dull." There are so many lawyers that half of them "are in a state of actual starvation." Being a physician would mean living "by the diseases and Infirmities" of his "fellow Creatures" (15: 139). He wonders, therefore,

What would you think of my becoming an Author, and relying for support upon my pen. Indeed I think the illegibility of my handwriting is very authorlike. How proud you would feel to see my works praised by the reviewers, as equal to proudest productions of the scribbling sons of John Bull. (15: 139)

Hawthorne wrote prophetically, although he could not have known it at the time; for it took him many years – sixteen – to put his name on a book he had written (*Twice-Told Tales* in 1837). In many respects, Hawthorne took nothing more important away from Bowdoin than the friendships he made there. His classmate Franklin Pierce became a lifelong friend and went on to become President of the United States. Hawthorne would write Pierce's campaign biography, and Pierce would reward him by appointing him American Consul in Liverpool, the most lucrative job Hawthorne would ever have. Another classmate, Horatio Bridge, would secretly subsidize the publication of *Twice-Told Tales* and would agree to let Hawthorne edit the journal he kept as a US Naval officer and member of the first expedition to intercept slave-traders off the coast of Africa. *The Journal of an African Cruiser* would appear in 1845

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with Hawthorne's name alone on the cover. A third classmate, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, would write a very favorable review of *Twice-Told Tales* and also become a lifelong friend and supporter.

Hawthorne enjoyed considerable success after the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, but he struggled during the first decade of his career to achieve even modest success. He attempted to promote three different collections of linked tales (*Seven Tales of My Native Land*, *Provincial Tales*, and *The Story Teller*), but he settled for anonymous publication of individual stories and sketches in such periodicals as *The New England Magazine* and in annual gift books, such as Samuel Goodrich's *The Token*. If not quite the "obscurest man of letters in America," as he would later style himself, he enjoyed little public reputation before 1837 (9: 3).

With the publication of *Twice-Told Tales*, however, Hawthorne emerged as an important writer whose national reputation grew steadily through the following decades. In every respect, the late 1830s represent the watershed moment in Hawthorne's personal and professional life – the period of his first real professional success and of his engagement to Sophia Peabody (the first surviving love letter dates from 6 March 1839).

He got his first real job in 1839 when he became a measurer at the Boston Custom House, earning \$1,500 a year, and he began a pattern that would continue for most of his lifetime: when he worked outside the home he wrote relatively little; when he had no job he wrote prolifically. Brenda Wineapple believes that "Hawthorne held on to his government job not just because he needed the money or because the country ignored its artists – though both were true – but because he liked it."<sup>1</sup> He especially liked the male camaraderie. The working experience was not uniformly positive, however, and Hawthorne complained to Sophia of the dehumanizing effects of his job. "I am a machine," he observed, "and am surrounded by hundreds of similar machines; – or rather, all of the business people are so many wheels of one great machine" (15: 330).

Hawthorne met Sophia Peabody in 1838, beginning a three-and-half-year courtship that ended in marriage on 9 July 1842. The 109 surviving love letters that Hawthorne wrote to Sophia before their wedding reveal not only his intense feelings but also the high hopes he had for his ability to be both a husband and a writer. Although allowances should be made for a lover's enthusiasm, the letters testify to Sophia's remarkable power to make him know himself. In a well-known letter from 4 October 1840, for example, he admits, "I used to think that I could imagine all passions, all feelings, all states of the heart and mind; but how little did I know what it is to be mingled with another's being! Thou only hast taught me that I have a heart – thou only hast thrown a light deep downward, and upward, into my soul" (15: 495). Hawthorne anticipates

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the language he uses at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*. There, as he reflected upon his relationship to the novel he had written, he conceived of it as a type of love letter, an agent for his male ego that would court that “one heart and mind of perfect sympathy” from which he felt himself divided. The “printed book,” he could imagine, might “find out the divided segment of the writer’s own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it” (1: 3–4). Writing and relationship – both were creative. As he told Sophia in the same letter of 4 October:

Thou only hast revealed me to myself; for without thy aid, my best knowledge of myself would have been merely to know my own shadow – to watch it flickering on the wall, and mistake its fantasies for my own real actions. Indeed, we are but shadows – we are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest substance of a dream – till the heart is touched. That touch creates us – then we begin to be – thereby we are beings of reality, and inheritors of eternity. (15: 495)

Hawthorne was thirty-six when he wrote this letter. His zeal suggests a long-standing ideal belatedly realized, a change within himself that must have seemed like a rebirth. Courtship and marriage, he believed, would kindle his imagination and cause an outpouring of literary production. In the hope of combining work and creativity and discovering a home for himself and Sophia, Hawthorne resigned his job at the Boston Custom House in January 1841 and soon took up residence at Brook Farm, a utopian community founded by George Ripley in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. In the interim, he wrote two books for children, *Famous Old People* and *Liberty Tree*, which, along with *Grandfather's Chair*, were published by his soon-to-be sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody (Wineapple, 143). Initially Hawthorne’s spirits soared at Brook Farm, despite the hard physical labor. This morning “I have done wonders,” he would exclaim to Sophia on April 14. “Before breakfast, I went out to the barn, and began to chop hay for the cattle. . . . Then I brought wood and replenished the fires; and finally sat down to breakfast and ate up a huge mound of buckwheat cakes.” Hawthorne could even celebrate the less pleasant aspects of the work. “After breakfast,” he continued, “Mr. Ripley put a four-pronged instrument into my hands, which he gave me to understand was called a pitch-fork; and he and Mr. Farley being armed with similar weapons, we all three commenced a gallant attack upon a heap of manure” (15: 528). References to shoveling manure, which Hawthorne called the “gold mine,” became a running joke in the letters he wrote from the Farm. Hawthorne struggled to situate himself in positive terms within a limited matrix of acceptable nineteenth-century male identities, so it is not surprising

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that the Brook Farm letters emphasize the benefits of physical labor on his body. The experience gave him the simple pleasure of identifying himself as a manual laborer. "I shall make an excellent husbandman," he punned to Sophia. "I feel the original Adam reviving within me" (15: 529). In fact, he allowed his writing ability to be eclipsed by his growing physical prowess, proudly complaining to Sophia on 22 April that he was scribbling in "an abominable hand" because he had been chopping wood and turning a grindstone all morning, and the exertion had been likely to "disturb the equilibrium of the muscles and sinews" (15: 533). Two weeks later he would brag, "I have gained strength wonderfully – grown quite a giant, in fact – and can do a day's work without the slightest inconvenience" (15: 539).

Brief though it was, Hawthorne's experience at Brook Farm not only provided him with raw material (in the form of notebook passages) for *The Blithedale Romance*, published a decade later, but it gave him the chance to test his belief in various ideas about work and community. Among other things, Brook Farmers wanted to liberate labor and laborers from conditions they regarded as virtual enslavement in order to "insure," in Ripley's words, a "more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry."<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne wanted to believe in this agenda, and he did his best to spiritualize even the most onerous labor. "I have been at work under the clear blue sky, on a hill side," he wrote Sophia on 4 May. "Sometimes it almost seemed as if I were at work in the sky itself; though the material in which I wrought was the ore from our gold mine." Using his imagination and his pen alchemically, Hawthorne turns "lead" into gold. Anticipating Walt Whitman's ecological organicism in "Song of Myself" and other poems, Hawthorne assures Sophia, "there is nothing so unseemly and disagreeable in this sort of toil, as thou wouldst think. It defiles the hands, indeed, but not the soul. This gold ore is a pure and wholesome substance; else our Mother Nature would not devour it so readily, and derive so much nourishment from it, and return such a rich abundance of good grain and roots in requital of it" (15: 542).

Brook Farm failed in part because the community never attracted enough farmers to allow the release from labor that the founders intended. Hawthorne came to the conclusion that he would spend most of his time and energy in physical labor and thus be unable to write. As early as 1 June, his view of the farm changed drastically. "I think this present life of mine gives me an antipathy to pen and ink, even more than my Custom House experience did," he admitted, and he went on to call it the "worst" of "all hateful places," fearing that his

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soul might be “buried and perish under a dung-heap or in a furrow of the field” (15: 545). He liked outdoor work and liked the idea of a balance between work and writing, but the farm took virtually all of his time and mental energy. “My former stories all sprung up of their own accord, out of a quiet life,” he told his friend George Hillard. “Now, I have no quiet at all; for when my outward man is at rest – which is seldom, and for short intervals – my mind is bothered with a sort of dull excitement, which makes it impossible to think continuously of any subject” (15: 550). He was coming to see his situation as a form of “bondage” (15: 557). He worried about becoming “brutified” (15: 558) and transformed into a “slave” (15: 559), and he soon left Brook Farm for good.

Without employment, Hawthorne embarked upon several publishing projects, including the second edition of *Twice-Told Tales* and *Biographical Stories for Children*, while he planned for his marriage to Sophia. He arranged with Emerson to rent his family’s Old Manse in Concord, and he and Sophia moved in on their wedding day (9 July 1842). Situated on the banks of the Concord River and overlooking the site of the Old North Bridge and the first battleground of the Revolutionary War, the Old Manse stimulated Hawthorne’s imagination. The three years he spent in Concord (July 1842–November 1845) represent a fascinating period in his life. Concord in the 1840s was a kind of intellectual utopian community and included a remarkable gathering of intellectual and artistic personalities: Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Ellery Channing, and others whom we now associate with the Transcendentalist, abolitionist, women’s suffrage, and other reform movements. These friendships have provided Hawthorne’s modern readers with much food for speculation about influence, rivalry, and cross-pollination.<sup>3</sup> Hawthorne’s notebooks record numerous visits and outings that, if time travel were a possibility, literary scholars would pay dearly to observe.

During the first winter at the Manse, for example, the meadow at the foot of their orchard froze over, and one of Sophia’s letters describes Hawthorne skating with Emerson and Thoreau. “Do you know how majestically he skates?” she would tell Louisa Hawthorne. “He looks very kingly, wrapt in his cloak, gliding to & fro” (15: 667). Hawthorne loved the opportunity for such recreation. He would tell Margaret Fuller, “I have skated like a very schoolboy, this winter. Indeed, since my marriage, the circle of my life seems to have come round, and brought back many of my school-day enjoyments; and I find a deeper pleasure in them now than when I first went over them. I pause upon them, and taste them with a sort of epicurism, and am boy and man together” (15: 671).

Hawthorne especially liked Thoreau. Describing Thoreau as a “wild, irregular, Indian-like sort of fellow,” Hawthorne praised his writing as the product

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of a “genuine and exquisite observer of nature – a character almost as rare as that of a true poet” (15: 656). Thoreau “seems inclined to lead a sort of Indian life among civilized men,” Hawthorne wrote in his notebook, “an Indian life, I mean, as respects the absence of any systematic effort for a livelihood” (8: 354). Hawthorne bought the boat that Thoreau and his brother John had used for their trip on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in 1839, changing the name from *Musketaquid* to *Pond Lily*, and he has fun at his own expense in contrasting Thoreau’s rowing ability with his own. Whereas Thoreau “managed the boat so perfectly, either with two paddles or with one, that it seemed instinct with his own will” (8: 355–56), Hawthorne notes that “the boat seemed to be bewitched” when he tried to row it, and “turned its head to every point of the compass except the right one” (8: 356). When Thoreau decided to visit Staten Island in the spring of 1843, Hawthorne wished that Thoreau would remain in Concord, “he being one of the few persons, I think, with whom to hold intercourse is like hearing the wind among the boughs of a forest-tree” (8: 369). Hawthorne visited Thoreau at his Walden Pond cabin and, after moving to Salem, arranged for him to lecture at the Salem Lyceum on two occasions. Thoreau read an early version of “Economy,” the first chapter of what would become *Walden* (1854).

In *Hawthorne's Fuller Mystery*, Thomas Mitchell has carefully analyzed Hawthorne’s relationship with Margaret Fuller, and he details the times they spent together during the Concord years.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell argues for Fuller’s profound influence on Hawthorne and his writing, especially on such characters as Beatrice Rappaccini, Hester Prynne, Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, and Miriam Schaefer in *The Marble Faun*. Hawthorne’s letters and notebooks record many visits that Fuller paid to the Old Manse, and he described one remarkable meeting with Fuller in a lengthy notebook entry for 22 August 1842. Fuller was staying with the Emersons, and Hawthorne set out after dinner to return a book she had left at the Manse. Fuller was not home when he called, but he encountered her on his return journey through the woods in Sleepy Hollow. Sitting by Margaret’s side, Hawthorne would note, “we talked about Autumn – and about the pleasures of getting lost in the woods – and about the crows, whose voices Margaret had heard . . . and about the sight of mountains from a distance, and the view from their summits – and about other matters of high and low philosophy” (8: 343). As Mitchell has argued, this scene and passage may provide a basis for the forest scene in *The Scarlet Letter* in which Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale make their plans to leave Boston. Hester famously declares, “What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other!” (1: 195). Hawthorne and Fuller were interrupted by none other than Emerson, “who, in spite of his clerical



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consecration, had found no better way of spending the Sabbath than to ramble among the woods" (8: 343). The word "consecration" links the two passages and can fuel speculations about what was going through Hawthorne's mind when he wrote the scene in the novel.

Hawthorne never warmed to Emerson, and the conventional wisdom is that he disliked Concord's most famous citizen, perhaps resenting the attention Emerson received as philosopher-in-residence. But Hawthorne made several excursions with Emerson that bespeak a good friendship – a walk one Sunday in August 1842 to Walden Pond, a two-day walking trip later that fall to Harvard, Massachusetts, and then to a Shaker village three miles beyond (8: 361–62). On 3 April 1843, when Sophia was visiting her family in Salem, Hawthorne entertained Emerson at the Manse. Emerson appeared "with a sunbeam in his face," Hawthorne wrote, "and we had as good a talk as I ever remember experiencing with him." Emerson especially wanted to talk about Fuller, whom he "apotheosized" as the "greatest woman" of ancient or modern times, but the two men also discussed Thoreau and Brook Farm (8: 371).

One of the most remarkable events that occurred while the Hawthornes lived in Concord – especially important for its incorporation into *The Blithedale Romance* – involved the suicidal drowning of nineteen-year-old Martha Hunt in the Concord River, not far from the Old Manse. The incident occurred on July 9, 1845 – the Hawthornes' third wedding anniversary – and it takes some feat of imagination to see Hawthorne, on the night of his anniversary, out in a boat, dragging the river for Martha Hunt's body and devoting nine handwritten pages to the experience in his notebook. He would transfer the lengthy account almost verbatim into *The Blithedale Romance*, substituting Zenobia for Martha Hunt, but otherwise hardly changing his original account – probing for the body with a long pole, hauling it to the surface, trying in vain to force her rigid arms down to her sides (8: 263). Hawthorne wrote compulsively about the incident, which in the context of his wedding anniversary surely provided a traumatic example of love and death conjoined that he would build into the novel he wrote seven years later.

Although Hawthorne wrote very little during his courtship of Sophia (he was working hard to make marriage economically feasible), the Old Manse period resulted in the publication of twenty-one new tales and sketches, including "The Birth-mark," "Egotism; or, the Bosom Serpent," "The Celestial Railroad," "The Artist of the Beautiful," "Drowne's Wooden Image," and "Rappaccini's Daughter." Marriage gave him an economic motive to publish, and a settled domestic life gave him the opportunity, but most important, his relationship with Sophia inspired him to center his attention, more than he ever had before, on the creative possibilities and the problems of relationship.



Despite the wedded bliss expressed in “The New Adam and Eve” (one of the first stories he wrote at the Manse) and in some of Hawthorne’s letters and notebook entries, however, “The Birth-mark,” “The Artist of the Beautiful,” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” depict vexed and dangerous male–female relationships in which male characters direct violent impulses toward women. Georgiana in “The Birth-mark” and Beatrice in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” both die, at least in part because of male actions. It is always risky to read fiction biographically, but it is tempting in these cases to speculate that something in Hawthorne’s situation was provoking serious anxiety and causing him to struggle imaginatively with the tensions he felt between being a writer and being a husband and father.

Several letters he wrote after Una’s birth (3 March 1844) express bewilderment at his paternity. In a letter to his sister Louisa he admitted that he was “almost afraid to look” at the baby (16: 15), and even six weeks later he still doubted his fatherhood. Una, he said, “has not yet sufficiently realized herself in my soul; it seems like a dream, therefore, which needs such assurances as thy letter, to convince me that it is more than a dream” (16: 29). Fatherhood did force Hawthorne to think more pragmatically about his career, intensifying the pressure he felt to write simply in order to provide for his family and making him more concerned with writing as a business.

Hawthorne left the Old Manse and Concord because he could not afford to live there. Magazine publication paid poorly, and the Hawthornes struggled to pay rent on the Old Manse, especially after Una’s birth. Friends such as Franklin Pierce, Horatio Bridge, and John O’Sullivan tried to help by finding Hawthorne another government job. The only option Hawthorne could imagine was to return home – to Salem and the Manning house. Five months later, he finally secured a lucrative political appointment from President James K. Polk as Surveyor of the Salem Custom House. His yearly earnings approached \$1,200. He must have breathed a huge sigh of relief.

By the time Julian was born (22 June 1846), therefore, Hawthorne felt much better about himself as both a man and a father. He did not have to worry about making his writing support the family, and he wrote little during the Custom House period (1846–49). Hawthorne kept his position as Surveyor for three years, until the election of the Whig Zachary Taylor to the Presidency resulted in his firing in the summer of 1849. Hawthorne and his friends tried unsuccessfully to retain the Surveyor’s position amid increasingly politicized accusations of corruption. Hawthorne protested that he had not been “appointed to office as a reward for political services,” nor had he “acted as a politician since” (16: 263), and he vowed to “immolate” his critics if they should succeed in getting him out of office (16: 269). “I may perhaps select a victim,” he wrote to Longfellow,

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“and let fall one little drop of venom on his heart, that shall make him writhe before the grin of the multitude for a considerable time to come” (16: 270).

Hawthorne announced on June 8, 1849, that he had been “turned out of office” (16: 273), and he writes Longfellow that it feels as if his “head has been chopt off” (16:283). He would use the same image in “The Custom-House” when he termed the collection of which *The Scarlet Letter* was originally intended to form a part, the “POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF A DECAPITATED SURVEYOR” (1: 43). Adding to Hawthorne’s dark mood was the death of his mother on 31 July.

He would have his revenge on his political enemies in *The Scarlet Letter*, the novel he sat down to write almost immediately after he lost his job as Surveyor. He would tell his publisher, James T. Fields, that in the process of writing, “all political and official turmoil has subsided within me, so that I have not felt inclined to execute justice on any of my enemies” (16: 305), but most scholars think Hawthorne merely sublimated his anger in his depiction of the Puritans who, though actually members of the Massachusetts Bay colony, stand in for the Salemites with whom Hawthorne felt angry. Many readers have seen a connection between Hawthorne and his heroine, whose punishment and ostracism from the Puritan community force her to eke out a living as a kind of artist.

Hawthorne worked on *The Scarlet Letter* during the fall and winter of 1849–50, and its publication in the spring (16 March) inaugurated the most productive period in his writing career, as he published eight books in the first four years of the 1850s. Moving to Lenox in western Massachusetts in the autumn of that year, Hawthorne wrote and published *The House of the Seven Gables*. Trading on his increasing popularity, he collected his earlier children’s fiction as *True Stories from History and Biography*, wrote a new volume of children’s stories, *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, and also published a final collection of short fiction, *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales*. On 5 August 1850, he joined a party to climb Monument Mountain in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he met Herman Melville, who would soon buy an old farmhouse in Pittsfield and rapidly develop into a close friend. “Before the day was over,” Melville biographer Hershel Parker notes, “Melville decided Hawthorne was the most fascinating American he had ever met,” and for his part, Hawthorne “did something phenomenal. He liked Melville so much that he asked him to spend a few days with him.”<sup>5</sup>

Many scholars believe that the rapidly developing friendship with Hawthorne, as well as the positive reinforcement Hawthorne’s example provided to write from the heart, significantly influenced *Moby-Dick* (1851), the novel on which Melville was working. Melville dedicated *Moby-Dick* to