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Property and Selfhood in Herman Melville's *Pierre*

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Large parts of the Herman Melville canon focus on the intricacies of property relations, by which I mean the social, legal, political, and personal stakes of ownership. Melville's first novel, *Typee* (1846), is a captivity narrative that turns on the issue of American imperialism in the South Pacific; the depiction of the whaling industry in *Moby-Dick* (1851) recounts a major aspect of mid-century capitalism; "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1856) directly thematizes property rights vis-à-vis human rights; "Benito Cereno" (1856) offers Melville's notoriously ambiguous portrayal of the reduction of humans to material goods through slavery; and *The Confidence-Man* (1857) is a series of business swindles, charity rackets, stock sales, and other exchanges of property.

Pierre; or, the Ambiguities (1852), Melville's most carefully planned novel and the work that represents a turning point in his career, offers his most sustained engagement with the discourse of property rights. At the level of diction, Melville repeatedly turns to the idiom of property in order to describe his characters' personal interactions ("pervading possession," "seizes possession," "untrammeled possession," "inalienable allegiance," "unentangled," "vassalage," "plagiarized," and the punning "deed of shame" offer a small taste of Melville's lan-

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guage). Meanwhile, the plot traces Pierre Glendinning's transformation from the scion of a well-heeled family with vast rural landholdings into the propertyless renter of a tenement whose very name, The Apostles, evokes Jesus's admonition to his disciples to relinquish their possessions. Owning property makes possible Pierre's fortunate start in life, and being without property is the dismal result of his strange attempt to protect his father's reputation by pretending that Isabel, the senior Pierre's unacknowledged daughter (and thus Pierre's half-sister), is his wife. But property also functions as much more than an economic barometer of Pierre's early success and ultimate downfall. In this novel Melville presents a remarkably meticulous analysis of how notions of property rights and ideas of subjectivity are mutually constituted.

To say that *Pierre* theorizes the relationship between property and identity is to position the book in a line of descent from the early modern philosophers whose work accompanied the rise of modern capitalism. As John Locke wrote in his foundational *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), "every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*: This no Body has any Right to but himself."[1] C. B. Macpherson offers the classic gloss on Locke's philosophy, which he terms "possessive individualism": "Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities. . . . The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relation of ownership . . . was read back into the nature of the individual."[2] At its very core, this theorization of modern selfhood contains an unacknowledged racial and gender specificity that makes it an inadequate conceptualization of subjectivity. But beyond these limitations, this version of subjectivity under capitalism pivots on a key paradox that, as we will see, Melville takes as a central object of concern in his novel of property relations. The Lockean self, according to Macpherson, preserves a core of inalienability by maintaining a distinction between one's labor and one's self. That is, even though the individual "is free

[1] John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690), in Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), p. 287.

[2] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 3.

to alienate his capacity to labour," one cannot alienate "his whole person" (*Possessive Individualism*, p. 269). This concept of subjectivity evinces a longing for an inner coherence and impregnability that to this day structures a common version of liberal selfhood. Yet by Melville's era, the paradox of alienability and inalienability built into the dominant version of American selfhood was already a problematic abstraction undercut by slavery, working-class agitation, and, more generally, the ever-increasing volume of human interactions that were determined by market relations.

In *Pierre* Melville analyzes the intricacies of subjectivity and economics by way of two concrete and quite different forms of antebellum American property relations—the residual estates of the landed gentry in upstate New York and the emergent urban market economy of New York City. A condition of unassailability, of timelessness and imperviousness, infuses the family estate, while incessant exchange characterizes the novel's urban finale. Taken together, these opposed economic arrangements represent Melville's meditation on how the very concept of alienability, the definitive aspect of modern property relations, impacted forms of non-slave identity in the antebellum United States. The condition of inalienability that structures the patrimonial estates presents the initially attractive possibility of removal from the turbulent world of property relations, exchange, and commodification, but it turns out to be an ideological fantasy supported primarily by violence and death. Melville, always one to brood about selfhood, was faced in *Pierre* with his realization of the rottenness at the core of his fantasy of a subjectivity not riven by alienability, and he responds with the novel's urban section. This second portion of the novel presents market relations as a horror wreaked principally on the self. *Pierre*, ultimately, represents Melville's monument to the desirability—and his dismay at the impossibility—of imagining identity outside the syntax of a market economy's version of property relations.

Pierre signals its concern with property relations from the opening scene. As Pierre finds Lucy perched

at her window and banters flirtatiously with his betrothed, she can only respond by asking, "Tell me, why should ye youths ever show so sweet an expertness in turning all trifles of ours into trophies of yours?"[3] Although this is a minor scene, and signals as much as anything the way in which Shakespeare's writings will hover in the background of *Pierre*, the exchange between Melville's young lovers nonetheless suggests that questions of ownership and, more pointedly, theft will be central to the novel.

Immediately following Lucy's complaint about Pierre's taking her "trifles" for his own use, Melville explicitly locates the dual problems of theft and the legitimacy of property rights within both Glendinning familial and American national histories. Pierre's demesne represents

> the proudest patriotic and family associations of the historic line of Glendinning. On the meadows which sloped away from the shaded rear of the manorial mansion, far to the winding river, an Indian battle had been fought, in the earlier days of the colony, and in that battle the paternal great-grandfather of Pierre, mortally wounded, had sat unhorsed on his saddle in the grass, with his dying voice, still cheering his men in the fray. This was Saddle-Meadows, a name likewise extended to the mansion and the village. . . . The Glendinning deeds by which their estate had so long been held, bore the cyphers of three Indian kings, the aboriginal and only conveyancers of those noble woods and plains. (*Pierre*, pp. 5–6)

The history of Saddle Meadows is thus replete with intense violence and the expropriation of Native American lands by white settlers. Carolyn L. Karcher has written that this brutal history means that the "rightful title" (in her phrase)[4] to the Glendinnings' vast landholdings is not in fact sanctioned by "very long uninterrupted possession by [Pierre's] race" (*Pierre*, p. 8), but rather derives more precisely from the decimation of those

[3] Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, vol. 7 of *The Writings of Herman Melville: The Northwestern-Newberry Edition* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1971), p. 4. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

[4] See Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980), p. 96.

vanquished Indians.[5] Such is certainly the case, as signified by the narrator's sardonic, somewhat mocking tone throughout this section. But Karcher's use of the legalistic phrase "rightful title" also takes for granted the critical issue of how white ownership is legitimated in the first place. Indeed, Melville highlights this issue through his own contractual language. By identifying the conquered Indians as "conveyancers" of their land, Melville ironically translates acquisition through violence into the terms of a simple and legal transfer of property. As Eric Cheyfitz has argued in a penetrating assessment of the 1823 Supreme Court decision in *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, which directly adjudicated the dispersal of lands formerly held by Native Americans, the discourse of conveyance converts the Indians' communal relation to the land into the individualized terms of Western property law's concepts of title and alienability. This not only misrepresents the traditional relation of Indians to the land, but, more crucially, it also allows the expropriation of that land to be understood within the putatively rational and orderly discourse of law, rather than as an episode of violent dispossession.[6]

Both *Johnson v. M'Intosh* and the history recounted in *Pierre* demonstrate that the will to empire proceeds most efficiently under the terms and language of law. Within the fictional world of Melville's novel, the technical language of law also enables Pierre's personal flights of ideological fancy. Imagining conquered native inhabitants as free, individualized owners and thus as "conveyancers" of hypothetically alienable property leads directly to Pierre's own mystified relationship to his estate. Reverence for "the historic line of Glendinning" and its long possession produces in him a feeling of "fond ideality" toward Saddle Meadows, as if a "talisman touched the whole earthly landscape about him" and "his very horizon was to him as a memorial ring" (*Pierre*, p. 8). For Pierre a history of violent

[5] See also Samuel Otter's discussion of Melville's punning use of race to signify both an older notion of derivation from a shared ancestor and the crucial sense of racial difference that undergirded the suppression of Native Americans (see Otter, "The Eden of Saddle Meadows: Landscape and Ideology in *Pierre*," *American Literature*, 66 [1994], 67).

[6] See Eric Cheyfitz, "Savage Law: The Plot Against American Indians in *Johnson and Graham's Lessee v. M'Intosh* and *The Pioneers*," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 110–12.

seizure disguised as a conveyance results in a misplaced nostalgia, and at the same time produces an acquisitive mindset that magically stretches the Glendinning domain through the infinity of the horizon itself.

Melville complements this mystified version of Glendinning family history with a depiction of Saddle Meadows that is itself a compensatory fantasy of a time and place existing outside historical change. Melville represents Saddle Meadows as an inviolable, unchangeable, and inalienable estate. He does so initially by invoking antebellum New York state's wealthiest families' vast landholdings, those "far-descended Dutch meadows" that have "surviv[ed] . . . the Revolutionary flood" (*Pierre*, p. 11). Melville clarifies the stakes of his invoking of the New York Dutch patroons when he directly ties the Glendinnings to those antebellum aristocrats: "we have been thus decided in asserting the great genealogical and real-estate dignity of some families in America, because in so doing we poetically establish the richly aristocratic condition of Master Pierre Glendinning" (p. 12). In fact, Melville's novel establishes a connection between the Glendinnings and antebellum America's wealthiest landowners that is more than just "poetical." The name of Melville's young protagonist specifically alludes to the Van Cortlandt patroons. Like the fictional Glendinnings, the historical Van Cortlandts featured three generations of men named Pierre, with the final Pierre inheriting the distinguished Cortlandt manor on the Hudson River and its vast surrounding property.[7]

Of these antebellum manors, Melville writes: "Such estates seem to defy Time's tooth, and by conditions which take hold of the indestructible earth seem to cotemporize their fee-simples with eternity" (*Pierre*, p. 11). The legal terminology is naturalized here and seemingly made permanent by its ties to "the indestructible earth," but this passage also underscores the

[7] See Henry A. Murray, "Explanatory Notes," in Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Murray (New York: Hendricks House, 1949), p. 430. Even closer to home for Melville, his mother directly descended from the first patroon, Kiliaen Van Rensselaer (see Murray, "Explanatory Notes," p. 437). On the autobiographical implications of Melville's maternal patroon ancestors, see also Otter, "Eden of Saddle Meadows," pp. 70–71; and Nicola Nixon, "Compromising Politics and Herman Melville's *Pierre*," *American Literature*, 69 (1997), 722–23.

timelessness and inalienability of these estates to the point of redundancy. A fee-simple, the broadest property interest recognized by law, expresses a property right that endures until a current holder dies without heirs. Its duration is by definition potentially infinite. Melville, however, buttresses even this potentially infinite title when he writes that the patroon estates "are now owned by their present proprietors, by as good nominal title as any peasant owns his father's old hat, or any duke his great-uncle's old coronet" (p. 11). Here, ownership even exceeds claims of title, as the tricky simile transforms the vast real estate holdings into the cozy form of a personal article for which a title is not even necessary. The massive real estate holdings fit New York's antebellum aristocrats as snugly as an old piece of clothing.

As John Carlos Rowe has pointed out, Melville continues the conversion of legal edifices into timeless natural forms when he writes of the "magnificent Dutch Manors at the North, whose perches are miles—whose meadows overspread adjacent counties—and whose haughty rent-deeds are held by their thousand farmer tenants, so long as grass grows and water runs; which hints of a surprising eternity for a deed, and seems to make lawyer's ink unobliterable as the sea" (*Pierre*, pp. 10–11).[8] But while the estates are clearly represented here as a part of the natural landscape, it is also important to note that the class relations existing within this manorial system are similarly eternalized by the historically explosive phrase "so long as grass grows and water runs." Melville invokes this expression twice to describe the relationship of the "thousand farmer tenants" to the owners of the estates.

The phrase of course comes from Andrew Jackson's 1829 promise to the Creek Indian nation that it would be granted occupancy of the Oklahoma land for time immemorial. Samuel Otter argues that the passage's Jacksonian allusion ties the federal removal of Native Americans in the Southeastern states to the New York state government's willingness to condone the virtually feudal exploitation of tenant farmers in the Northeast.[9]

[8] See Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), p. 78.

[9] See Otter, "Eden of Saddle Meadows," p. 71.

Otter's conclusion is logical and persuasive, but it also skips over consideration of why Melville would take a hypocritical promise of accommodation, which the 1840s articulation of "Manifest Destiny" had rendered risible, and revive it as a metaphor for permanent class relations in the North. Like the Oklahoma land promised to Native Americans, the "rent-deeds" are ironically represented as an accommodation to the needs of the tenants. Melville's phrasing also reads the racial difference that is endemic to Jackson's guarantee back into the manorial class relations, thereby instilling the supposed biological permanence of racial difference into the manorial class division. Melville's account of the Dutch manors thus suggests that nature itself directly warrants their boundaries, while it simultaneously rewrites class difference as biological difference. No wonder the "lawyer's ink" appears "unobliterable as the sea."

As Melville depicts estates such as Saddle Meadows as eternal or "unobliterable," he also shows how that ideology of inalienability is actively maintained. He does so particularly through the character of Pierre's mother, Mary Glendinning, whose commitment to the notion of property is incredibly intense. For instance, when she is confronted with unpleasantness, Mary habitually turns conversations back to the conditions of her estate. When Pierre slips into a silent, impenetrable meditation after initially encountering Isabel, Mary responds by abruptly changing the subject to Pierre's business dealings with his tenants in Saddle Meadows (*Pierre*, p. 48). Similarly, when Pierre shocks his mother by querying Reverend Falsgrave regarding whether he should "honor [his] father, if [he] knew him to be a seducer," Mary snaps the conversation back to an earlier discussion about kicking an adulterous tenant off her land (p. 103). And as Pierre begins to realize that Isabel's existence will eventually force a confrontation with his mother, he agonizes about "her exaggerated ideas of the inalienable allegiance of a son" (p. 96).

The rhetoric of property's transmission between generations similarly provides the metaphors that Mary uses to understand transgression and punishment. Convinced that Pierre's odd behavior results from infidelity to Lucy, Mary conjectures that the other woman "must be both poor and vile—some

chance-blow of a splendid, worthless rake, doomed to inherit both parts of her infecting portion—vileness and beauty" (*Pierre*, p. 131). A double entendre of property likewise works for denouncing Pierre's presumed role in the affair: "swiftly to be extinguished is that race, whose only heir but so much as impends upon a deed of shame" (p. 131). In Mary's language, the "deed" becomes both the shameful act itself and the frightful possibility of bequeathing property to illegitimate heirs.

For Mary, however, deeds and inheritances are not merely semantic matters. As we have been told, family estates such as Saddle Meadows "cotemporize their fee-simples with eternity." Therefore Mary works very hard to keep the estate securely within the Glendinning line. For example, although "Mrs. Glendinning entertained a particular partiality" for Reverend Falsgrave, it is "not enough to marry him, as he ten times knew by very bitter experience" (*Pierre*, p. 97). Mary is unwilling to allow her own sentiments to induce her into a position where she might lose any control of Saddle Meadows. Although Melville does not precisely date the action of his plot, if the book's action takes place before the 1848 passage of the New York Married Women's Property Act, the legal doctrine of coverture would have relegated control over Saddle Meadows to Mary's new husband. And even though the 1848 statute allowed women to maintain separate control of property they brought into a marriage, details about how the statutes actually worked, especially regarding a wife's ability to enter contracts, remained vague and shifting for years.[10] In the time frame of *Pierre*, remarriage for Mary would have meant either explicit legal coverture or at least giving consideration to a new husband's ideas regarding the family property. This latter possibility becomes especially relevant when we recall that the senior Glendinning's will was written before young Pierre was born and that in the will "all the Glendinning property was declared his mother's" (*Pierre*, p. 179). Mary refuses Falsgrave's overtures and thereby avoids marital hazards to her property holdings.

Mary, as if to keep property figuratively close to home, early in the book also instructs the only male heir of Saddle

[10] See Norma Basch, *In the Eyes of the Law: Women, Marriage, and Property in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 136–61.

Meadows: "you, Pierre, are going to be married before long, I trust, not to a Capulet, but to one of our own Montagues" (p. 18). Mary thus rejects marriage for herself and imagines her son's marriage as an incestuous affair that keeps property within the family, and her entire character is built around the project of rendering Glendinning family property immune from any form of expropriation. This task goes to such an extreme in the novel that Melville even converts Mary into the symbol of specifically patriarchal authority within Saddle Meadows. In one scene, she becomes the implicit father of her tenants. While discussing (what else?) a property problem—specifically whether to evict Ned, the adulterous tenant, from her land—Mary tells Falsgrave: "He shall not stay on any ground of mine; my mind is made up, sir. Infamous man!—did he not have a wife as virtuous and beautiful now, as when I first gave her away at your altar?" (p. 99). Figured as the patriarchal father of a wedding ceremony, Mary's gendered identity implicitly transcends any threat to her real estate that could arise from the inequitable property laws of the mid-century United States. Moreover, the financial and hierarchical arrangement between Mary and her farmer-tenants is here granted the permanence of a biological, familial relationship. Through Mary in particular, obsessed as she is with property, committed to keeping her land deeds free from the hands of others, and even figured as the replacement patriarch of Saddle Meadows, Melville constructs the landed estate as unassailable "so long as grass grows and water runs."

Pierre, though, pivots on the issue of identity: of the elder Pierre's secret paternity, of Isabel Banford's self-presentation as Pierre's sister, of Glendinning Stanly's strange doubling of Pierre—to name only the most central examples. Melville's interest in identifying the underpinnings of identity and its relation to forms of property emerges first in the Saddle Meadows section of the novel. Just as Melville represents the Glendinnings' property as inviolate and inalienable, he imagines the form of subjectivity associated with Saddle Meadows as

similarly immune from historical change. Most notably, we have the three generations of Pierres and the evasion of historical change that is implicit in the repetition of the name. Similarly, Pierre notoriously addresses his mother as "sister," thus compressing the generational difference between them into an undifferentiated present tense. And Mary Glendinning actually embodies this escape from history within herself. She is introduced as a woman "of unfluctuating rank, health, and wealth" (*Pierre*, p. 4), whose suitors are "little less young than her own son Pierre" (p. 5) because "in mature age, the rose still miraculously clung to her check" (p. 4). And as if to supplement Mary's immutable and timeless personal features, we learn virtually nothing about her past. By way of exemplary contrast, we learn a great deal about propertyless Isabel's probable mother. She is one of the "French emigrants of quality" who came to America to escape the bloodletting of that quintessentially historical event, the French Revolution—which as a child Pierre learned about in his own "little history" book (p. 75). Finally, as if to highlight the uniquely unchanging Glendinning identity, Melville gives a particularly ironic name to their family servant: Dates.

This compression of past, present, and future that suffuses identity at Saddle Meadows complements the surprisingly undeviating nature of family artifacts and livestock at the estate. Pierre drives the same phaeton as his father and grandfather (*Pierre*, p. 19), which is pulled by "steeds, whose great-great-great-grandfathers grand old Pierre had reined before" because "on the lands of Saddle Meadows, man and horse are both hereditary" (p. 32). Even more strange, the differences between species collapse at Saddle Meadows. The horses are "a sort of family cousins to Pierre" (p. 21), and the last scion of the Glendinning line even possesses horselike characteristics: "Pierre neighed out lyrical thoughts, as at the trumpet-blast, a war-horse paws himself into a lyric of foam" (p. 14). Melville's conflating the seemingly separate hereditary strains of the Glendinnings and their horses represents another way in which subjectivity at Saddle Meadows admits no deviations. As identity at Saddle Meadows erases differences between characters, between time periods, and even between species, it hinges on a

logic similar to the notion of the inalienable estate. Melville's depiction of the Glendinnings and their familial horses insistently imagines subjectivity as both uniform and cordoned off from any possibility of historical alteration.[11]

Created in bloodshed, trauma, and forced expropriation from its original inhabitants, Saddle Meadows emerges as a compensatory fantasy imagining land and identity as intertwined, self-authorized, immutable, and inalienable. The primal and consecratory scene of this ideological notion yoking bodies, land, and identity comes in the figure of Pierre's great-grandfather, who, "mortally wounded, had sat unhorsed on his saddle in the grass, with his dying voice, still cheering his men in the fray" during the battle for the land that would become Saddle Meadows (*Pierre*, pp. 5–6). As Pierre's ancestor bleeds into the meadows that would be named for his exploits, this key scene reads like a parody of the bond between property and labor on which the Lockean, liberal subject is founded. For Locke the admixture of one's labor transforms communal property into an individual's private property: "The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*" (*Second Treatise of Government*, pp. 287–88). Melville's scene takes this correlation between private property and selfhood to an absurd extreme, as in *Pierre* the labor ratifying private ownership is the horrific work of death and genocide.

With this depiction of the primal event whose full story the Glendinning family history suppresses, even as the effects of violence are celebrated down through the generations, Melville

[11] For alternative interpretations of the importance of the family resemblance of the horses, see Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land*; and Robert S. Levine, "Pierre's Blackened Hand," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, 1, no. 1 (1999), 23–44. Karcher argues that Melville's suggestion of a blood tie between Pierre and the horses makes them a stand-in for "the illegitimate mulatto children fathered by slaveholders" (*Shadow over the Promised Land*, p. 101). Levine's eye-opening argument elaborates on the connection that Karcher makes between the horses and the unacknowledged mulatto children of male slave owners. Levine argues that the horses / mulattos / Pierre / grandfather subplot represents Melville's larger interest in a slave culture's "tangled skeins of historical genealogies" ("Pierre's Blackened Hand," p. 35), which Melville largely hides from view behind Pierre's more obsessive interest in Isabel's paternity (see "Pierre's Blackened Hand," pp. 33–35).

demonstrates his understanding of how the ideology of imperialism works. While his earlier works such as *Typee* and *Omoo* (1847) famously lament the incursion of Western military powers and religions into the South Pacific, *Pierre* looks, ever so briefly, at the imperial mindset after the moment of decisive confrontation has already occurred.[12] *Pierre* indicates the way in which an initial moment of violence is rearticulated as the honorable genesis of a nation. And by giving only the briefest mention to this inaugural moment of bloodshed, Melville also suggests a crucial dualism. On the one hand, such violence refuses to recede completely from historical knowledge; on the other hand, everything about the form of private property that emerges from expropriation works to transform the repugnance of history into a series of compensatory fantasies—of permanence, of patriotic valor, of righteousness.

Melville's depiction of imperialist violence as the necessary precondition for private property accounts for the notoriously bizarre conditions of life at Saddle Meadows that have long puzzled the novel's readers. Although Melville famously described the book to Sophia Hawthorne as an innocuous "rural bowl of milk,"[13] readers have more often tended to agree with Eric Sundquist's assessment of "*Pierre*'s insanely pastoralized opening."[14] As any reader soon notices, the rural atmosphere of Saddle Meadows is claustrophobic, parodic, suffocating, and simply

[12] Indeed, Melville's repeated invocation of Andrew Jackson's infamous phrase directly links his analysis of imperialism in *Typee* and *Pierre*'s later depiction of whites' violent seizure of land from natives. In *Typee* Melville describes the absence of private property on Typee, and links the end of that non-titular relationship to the land with the Typees' inevitable decimation by imperialism: "musty parchments and title deeds there were none on the island; and I am half inclined to believe that its inhabitants hold their broad valleys in fee simple from Nature herself; to have and to hold, so long as grass grows and water runs; or until their French visitors, by a summary mode of conveyancing, shall appropriate them to their own benefit and behoof" (Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, vol. 1 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* [Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1968], p. 202).

[13] Herman Melville, letter to Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, 8 January 1852, in Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, vol. 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), p. 219.

[14] Eric J. Sundquist, *Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), p. 150. Or, as Henry

weird.[15] The narrative tone toward Pierre is also routinely hyperbolic, nearly hysterical, and virtually schizophrenic. For example, we first meet Pierre "issuing from the embowered and high-gabled old home of his fathers . . . dewily refreshed and spiritualized by sleep," while "the verdant trance lay far and wide; and through it nothing came but the brindled kine, dreamily wandering to their pastures, followed, not driven, by ruddy-cheeked, white-footed boys" (*Pierre*, p. 3). But such insouciance is only possible because Pierre is yet "thoughtless of that period of remorseless insight, when all these delicate warmths should seem frigid to him, and he should madly demand more ardent fires" (p. 6).

Since Saddle Meadows is a form of property that both arises from and suppresses its bloody history, we can regard this "insanely" paradoxical world as Melville's vision of the legacy of imperialism. Saddle Meadows presents at once a fantasy of inalienable property that glosses over a reckoning of its full history and a queasy turmoil that is the specific and linked product of that expropriation. For Melville imperialism produces both a compensatory fantasy and a concomitant chaos that cannot be ignored. Because he sets up Saddle Meadows as the original form of property's "conveyance" from Indians to white settlers, we might even say that the Glendinning estate represents Melville's critique of the violence that he sees undergirding ownership in America.

While Melville suggests that the haze of timelessness is a powerful fantasy growing out of the expropriation of land and its conversion into private property, he draws attention to this ideological mystification by depicting conflicts around ownership that repeatedly crop up at Saddle Meadows. Melville hints

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Murray colorfully put it in the introduction to his 1949 edition of *Pierre*: "More than anything it is the language—not so much the long neologisms and convoluted sentences, but the idiom of fervent passion—which at too frequent points through sheer inanity, if not falsity, makes one wince and squirm, until a hand automatically reaches out for some object, anything, with which to oust 'Love's sweet bird from her nest'" (Murray, introduction to *Pierre*, p. xlii).

[15] For a particularly illuminating treatment of Saddle Meadows' landscape as Melville's response to the rise of American landscape painting and that genre's implicit erasure of historical struggle in favor of the "picturesque," see Otter, "Eden of Saddle Meadows."

at these problems when he notes the "various settlements of necessitous emigrants, who had lately pitched their populous shanties further up the river" (*Pierre*, p. 44). These squatters do not simply indicate the poverty and homelessness surrounding Saddle Meadows. Claiming land simply by virtue of settling on it, the squatters also exist outside of and implicitly reject the structure of payments and titles that constitutes the modern property system.[16] More directly, Melville alludes as well to actual New York state property disputes that would have resonated with his original readers. Referring to the skirmishes that occurred during the 1840s anti-rent wars, in which tenants of the manorial estates refused to pay their land-rents only to be suppressed by the state militia, Melville recalls how "regular armies, with staffs of officers, . . . have been sent out to distrain upon three thousand farmer-tenants of one landlord, at a blow" (*Pierre*, p. 11).[17] By writing this nonfictional and contemporary event into his novel, Melville highlights the gap between the actual, disputatious New York environment and the ideology of inalienability that serves to mask those real conditions of violence.

The fantasy of inalienable property that constitutes Saddle Meadows both arises from and works to conceal a reality in which threats to property are suppressed through violence. At the same time, *Pierre* nonetheless suggests that, for Melville, it is impossible to think about threats to property in America without also imagining a concomitant threat to subjectivity. Indeed, to read *Pierre* is to be convinced that not only are understandings of property central to how we understand selfhood á la Locke, but also that property and subjectivity are actually two versions of the same thing in this novel. This conflation first appears in the strange scene in which cousin Ralph surreptitiously paints the notorious chair-portrait of Pierre's father.

[16] On antebellum squatters, see Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1992), pp. 60–95.

[17] On the anti-rent wars, see Charles W. McCurdy, *The Anti-Rent Era in New York Law and Politics, 1839–1865* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001). On the literary history of the anti-rent wars, see Roger Hecht, "Rents in the Landscape: The Anti-Rent War in Melville's *Pierre*," *ATQ*, n.s. 19 (2005), 37–50. Hecht interprets Melville's depiction of the anti-rent wars as a riposte to James Fenimore Cooper's conservative defense of the landlords in his Littlepage trilogy.

Ralph secretly paints the portrait of Pierre's father, who as a young man finds himself nonchalantly visiting Ralph; Aunt Dorothea describes him "sitting in the chair, rattling and rattling away, and so self-forgetful too, that he never heeded that all the while sly cousin Ralph was painting and painting just as fast as ever he could." She wryly concludes that "cousin Ralph was stealing his portrait"; "he slyly picked his portrait, so to speak" (*Pierre*, p. 77). As Dorothea puts it, the image of Pierre's father is a form of property that he is unable to secure from theft. And, appropriately enough as the descendant of wealthy landowners, his image is imagined in economic terms, expressly as a form of money that can be pickpocketed.

Melville directly supplies the connection between the pickpocketed image in the chair-portrait and Pierre's father's sense of his own identity. The painting mutely expresses the elder Pierre's private thoughts. Dorothea tells Pierre: "The reason your father did not want his portrait taken was, because he was secretly in love with the French young lady, and did not want his secret published in a portrait" (*Pierre*, p. 79). More pointedly, the chair-portrait itself "sometimes seems to say—Pierre, believe not the drawing-room painting; that is not thy father. . . . Look again, I am thy father. . . . Look again. I am thy real father, so much the more truly, as thou thinkest thou recognizest me not, Pierre" (p. 83).[18] As Melville frames it, the stolen image *is* Pierre's father's self, specifically because the chair-portrait erases the potential for gaps between representation and reality, external image and inner identity.

In the metaphoric logic of *Pierre*, the father's inability to secure property against theft in the painting scene—to protect his secret from exposure—is tantamount to a violation of his subjectivity. For one of the key ways in which *Pierre* imagines subjectivity is precisely through a discourse of secrets. Lucy Tartan and Mary Glendinning, for instance, regard penetrating a person's secrets as the key to understanding selfhood. In great distress, Lucy frets to Pierre: "could I ever think, that thy heart hath yet one private nook or corner from me;—fatal disenchanting day

[18] For an alternative, camp reading of the chair-portrait, see James Creech, *Closet Writing / Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's "Pierre"* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 130–50.

for me, my Pierre. . . . Thou must be wholly a disclosed secret to me" (*Pierre*, p. 37). Pierre's mother offers him a more direct warning: "consider well before thou determinest upon withholding confidence from me. I am thy mother. It may prove a fatal thing" (p. 96). Most dramatically, the secret of hidden paternity and its revelation proves essential to how Pierre's father understands his selfhood (gentleman, Christian, clandestine benefactor of Isabel), as well as to how Pierre comprehends the change within himself brought about by knowledge of Isabel's heretofore secret existence. In Melville's enigmatic but powerful phrasing regarding the younger Pierre, "Himself was too much for himself" (p. 49). This is because the sudden appearance of Isabel unlocks previously unknown depths within Pierre's self, as he imagines himself telling her: "But thou hast evoked in me profounder spells than the evoking one, thou face! For me, thou hast uncovered one infinite, dumb, beseeching countenance of mystery, underlying all the surfaces of visible time and space" (pp. 51–52). Here the revelation of Isabel's existence causes Pierre to feel a psychic disjunction within "himself" that leads only to a vision of his own soul as an imploring but absolutely inscrutable mystery.

Isabel herself is, of course, the book's most resonant secret, and so it is particularly appropriate that Melville powerfully brings together secrets, subjectivity, and property within her character. "Mystery! Mystery! Mystery of Isabel! Mystery! Mystery! Isabel and Mystery!" are the words that Pierre hears each time Isabel attempts to tell him about herself (*Pierre*, pp. 126, 150). And as she relates her only vaguely understood history to Pierre, she punningly describes it in the language of property and contracts: "thou art first entitled to my tale, then, if it suit thee, thou shalt make me the unentitled gift of thine" (p. 114). For Isabel learning about her newly discovered brother means conceiving of her own life as a form of exchangeable property, for which Pierre's recognition of her serves, in legal terminology, as the "consideration"—the item of value—that he exchanges for knowledge of her past. But if it seems odd that the language of property transactions should so color their initial meetings, we should recall that Pierre and Isabel repeatedly describe their relationship in the language of contracts and

property. She tells Pierre: "My whole being, all my life's thoughts and longings are in endless arrears to thee." And Pierre seconds the thought: "If thou feelest in endless arrears of thought to me, my sister; so do I feel toward thee" (p. 113). Similarly, as Pierre becomes increasingly obsessed with Isabel, he finds that "all thoughts now left him but those investing Isabel" (p. 136). Underscoring Isabel's status as the unacknowledged descendant of a family whose wealth is based on its vast and violently obtained property holdings, Melville dramatically uses the economic language of property, accumulated debts, and titles as a surrogate for identity itself.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Melville depicts Isabel's initial effects on Pierre as a series of assaults against his property in selfhood. Haunted by the image of Isabel's face after first encountering her, Pierre "felt that what he had always before considered the solid land of veritable reality, was now being audaciously encroached upon by bannered armies of hooded phantoms, disembarking in his soul, as from flotillas of specter-boats" (*Pierre*, p. 49). As Isabel's existence forces a sea change in his worldview, Pierre imagines his altered perception of his own identity expressly as a conquest of his soul. Even more, Isabel "seized the possession of his thoughts" (p. 50) and holds "pervading possession of his soul" (p. 106) in this new "wild vassalage" (p. 52). Isabel here becomes something like the return of the repressed that wreaks havoc on the self, which is evidently best understood, according to Melville, as a form of property.[19] Indeed, similar to the scene in which Melville presents cousin Ralph's painting of the chair-portrait as a revelation of the father's true identity that occurs by way of "stealing" or "pick[ing] his portrait" (*Pierre*, p. 77), Pierre's subjectivity is here represented as property that lies vulnerable to expropriation.

[19] Michael Paul Rogin's particular riff on the not-uncommon interpretation of Isabel as a figuration of Pierre's unconscious bears on my own analysis of the novel's property relations. See Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983). Blending psychology and history, Rogin writes that "Isabel is a reminder" of the Indians who originally occupied the Glendinning lands. "This savage child is the return of the dispossessed child of nature. . . . Isabel, calling attention to the Glendinning expropriation of Indian land, challenges Pierre's title to his estate" (*Subversive Genealogy*, p. 167).

In the scenes I have just looked at, both the intimation of the affair with the "young Frenchwoman" (*Pierre*, p. 83) that produced Isabel and the effect that knowledge of her existence produces within Pierre are figured as assaults on subjectivity, which is itself imagined as a property holding. The ironic relationship between these scenes depicting subjectivity as a form of property under duress and the other vision of Saddle Meadows limned out by Melville, in which the estate articulates a fantasy of inalienable property and immutable subjectivity, is key for understanding *Pierre*. While Melville suggests that the logic of permanent, unimpeachable title was founded on the violent suppression of alternative forms of landholding, he apparently can only imagine an actual upheaval of property relations—which is literally what Isabel's existence sets in motion—as an attack on subjectivity itself. To put this point a somewhat different way, although the violence of Saddle Meadows and its suffocating atmosphere appear to indicate Melville's condemnation of the property politics represented in antebellum America by those Saddle Meadows-like patroon estates, to imagine a rupture in their seeming impregnability is also to imagine the dissolution of identity itself. The notion of inalienable property in *Pierre* turns out to be what guarantees the notion of a coherent self.

Indeed, in the portion of the novel that follows Pierre's decision to pretend that Isabel is his wife, Melville makes it clear that more than a nominal connection exists between Pierre's family and Saddle Meadows. When Pierre informs his mother that he has secretly married someone other than Lucy Tartan, she disowns him with a strange denunciation: "Beneath my roof, and at my table, he who was once Pierre Glendinning no more puts himself" (*Pierre*, p. 185). Mary here strips the family name from Pierre's possession as she kicks him permanently out of Saddle Meadows. But Mary's use of the past tense to describe Pierre also indicates that she regards his decision as a deviation from his own selfhood; it is as if Pierre is no longer the same person. Actually, her language intimates that Pierre is no longer himself once he is removed from the family property. "He who was once Pierre Glendinning" conflates the notion of properties as specific, identifying traits—that which makes

Pierre unique and recognizable—with the idea of property as a claim or a right to ownership. To take away Pierre's claim to Saddle Meadows is, in Mary's language, to take away his identity as well, as she understands the property of Saddle Meadows to be the glue that holds together Pierre's subjectivity.

In her "unappeasable grief and scorn" (*Pierre*, p. 185) at Pierre's marriage to Isabel, Mary also turns to the rhetoric of property in order to understand the impact of Pierre's decision upon herself: "My own only son married to an unknown—thing! . . . He bears my name—Glendinning. I will disown it; were it like this dress, I would tear my name off from me, and burn it till it shriveled to a crisp!" (p. 193). In her fury, Mary cannot even imagine Isabel in the language of personhood and turns instead to the language usually accorded to inanimate possessions. But more important, even as she imagines renouncing her family name in disgrace, her phrasing here is intriguingly different from the language that she used to disown Pierre. Remaining at Saddle Meadows versus leaving the property makes the difference. In other words, if eviction from Saddle Meadows abrogated Pierre's very identity, then staying at the family estate underwrites her subjectivity to the extent that she can imagine abandoning her name without losing her self. Mary would violently slough off her name as she would a no longer wanted piece of personal property, but Pierre, once he is forced from Saddle Meadows, is no longer Pierre.

In fact, not only is Pierre no longer Pierre outside Saddle Meadows, but it is even possible for another person to become Pierre when he ascends to ownership of Saddle Meadows. When Mary dies, she wills "all Saddle Meadows and its rent-rolls" to Pierre's cousin, Glendinning Stanly (*Pierre*, p. 286). The narrator notes: "now the master of two immense fortunes . . . and the broad manorial meadows of the Glendinnings . . . Glen would seem all the finest part of Pierre, without any of Pierre's shame; would almost seem Pierre himself—what Pierre had once been to Lucy" (p. 288). As Pierre contemplates "this phantom of Glen transformed into the seeming semblance of himself," his hatred especially boils because Glen is "almost the personal duplicate of the man whose identity he assumes" (p. 289). And to round off Glen's transformation into Pierre, he predictably begins to

pay "renewed attentions to Lucy" (p. 287). In this jaw-dropping scene, the identity of "Pierre Glendinning" starts to appear amazingly fungible and adheres in the iteration of gestures, tendencies, and affects rather than in an essential being. In some ways, this starts to look like what we would now call performativity or the performative self, but I think it is crucial to remember that Melville does imagine a particular entity grounding this deindividualized notion of subjectivity. The characteristics that comprise Pierre seem more intimately attached to Saddle Meadows than to a specific body; indeed, Saddle Meadows itself appears to bestow subjectivity.

As what it means to be Pierre comes to be more and more attached to the property of Saddle Meadows, Melville is implicitly working toward a theory of subjectivity that is grounded in something other than the Lockean, unitary, and coherent self. Melville's move to think of subjectivity outside the notion of a unitary self helps to explain one of the book's more curious scenes, which occurs immediately after Glen inherits Saddle Meadows and becomes that "seeming semblance" of the original Pierre. As Pierre starts writing a book after moving with Isabel to New York, we learn that "he seems to have directly plagiarized from his own experiences, to fill out the mood of his apparent author-hero" (*Pierre*, p. 302). This identification of Pierre as a plagiarist is particularly significant because a plagiarist fundamentally undermines the synthesis between property and labor on which individualized Lockean selfhood is founded. In Ellen Weinauer's words, the derivation of "plagiarism" from the Latin word for kidnapping "highlights the connection between the stealing of words and the stealing of self."[20] Yet, more fundamentally, Melville's strange phrasing also compels us to ask how Pierre can "plagiarize" or steal from an experiential history that is already his. The upshot of this scene, however, is that after losing Saddle Meadows, Pierre appears to be categorically different from the young man who (in his mother's words) "was once Pierre Glendinning." Disconnected from Saddle Meadows, Pierre's subjectivity is parseable

[20] Weinauer, "Plagiarism and the Proprietary Self: Policing the Boundaries of Authorship in Herman Melville's 'Hawthorne and His Mosses,'" *American Literature*, 69 (1997), 699.

or divisible and his "experiences" can be separated from the rest of his identity.[21]

Melville's interest in imagining subjectivity in terms other than unitary selfhood also helps to explain the book's fascination with forgery, authenticity, and duplication. Aside from Glen's "seeming semblance" of Pierre, much of this interest redounds upon Isabel. For instance, Pierre, unable to conjure any direct resemblance between the memory of his father's features and Isabel, nonetheless "vaguely saw such in the [chair] portrait; therefore, not Pierre's parent, as any way rememberable by him, but the portrait's painted *self* seemed the real father of Isabel; for, so far as all sense went, Isabel had inherited one peculiar trait nowhither traceable but to it" (*Pierre*, p. 197; emphasis in original). And the climax of the book follows from Isabel's surprising recognition of herself in yet another anonymous portrait when she and Pierre visit the gallery of falsely attributed, counterfeit paintings. If there are "certain shadowy traces of her own unmistakable likeness" (p. 351) in "*No. 99. A stranger's head, by an unknown hand*" (p. 349), it is "not that the separate features were the same; but the pervading look of it, the subtler interior keeping of the entirety, was almost identical" (p. 351).

In these scenes Melville finds an analogy for selfhood in a series of copies. The painted image of Pierre's father becomes the "self" that passes down traits to Isabel, while yet another copy possesses an "interior" identical to her own. As in the scene referring to the "personal duplicate" Glen, these scenes imagine subjectivity as an endlessly reproducible effect rather than as an intrinsic essence. Crucially, insofar as the usurping Glen is a facsimile of Pierre and "illegitimate" Isabel is conjoined to the counterfeit painting in the gallery, Melville also suggests that the possibility of forgery or counterfeiting directly threatens the stability of property. If the inalienability of Saddle Meadows underwrites the notion of a coherent, immutable self, then here,

[21] On Pierre's self-plagiarism, see also Priscilla Wald, "Hearing Narrative Voices in Melville's *Pierre*," in *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 100–132. Wald's insightful argument regarding Melville's attempts to write against his culture's reigning pieties leads her to propose that his aim in concocting a plagiarizing author-hero is "to expose, and so to check, the compulsion to repeat the unconscious narrative of one's identity that follows on a declaration of independence" ("Hearing Narrative Voices," p. 124).

conversely, the reproducible or deindividualized self is aligned with the removal of Saddle Meadows from the original line of Pierre Glendinnings. In Melville's arrangement, the alienable and incoherent self directly and frightfully follows from the expropriation of property.

Depicted as a timeless estate lasting "so long as grass grows and water runs," Saddle Meadows represents a form of landholding that essentially exists outside the boundaries of property's regime. For as Walter Benn Michaels writes, "property, to be property," in the modern, bourgeois sense, "must be alienable."[22] And since the notion of a proprietary self in *Pierre* is directly tied to the inalienable stability of Saddle Meadows, Pierre's loss of Saddle Meadows and the ensuing depiction of a parseable subjectivity leads directly and logically to the nightmarish scenes in New York. Although critics have often found the rural and urban portions of the book strangely dissonant, the metropolis directly thematizes the relations of property that the rural estate transcends. In the metropolis everything is alienable, for sale, a commodity. Melville presents it as a horror.

Melville's interest in the connections between identity and property leads him, in the New York portion of the novel, repeatedly to depict alienability as a horror that registers most dramatically on the body. As soon as Pierre arrives in the city, he is accosted by a prostitute, "a wonderfully beautifully-featured girl; scarlet-cheeked, glaringly-arrayed, and of a figure all natural grace but unnatural vivacity" (*Pierre*, p. 237). Taking his cues from the sensational urban literature of the period, Melville immediately depicts the city as a place where women's bodies are transformed into "unnatural" appearances and presented as exchangeable property. And when Pierre's financial and emotional circumstances really start to crumble, Isabel also becomes such a figure of physical alienation, telling him: "Pierre, some

[22] Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987), p. 112.

way I must work for thee! See, I will sell this hair; have these teeth pulled out; but some way I will earn money for thee!" (p. 333).

Isabel's frantic pledge to sell body parts is especially interesting because she is the only person in the novel who actually has a marketable skill. In fact, she had earlier told Pierre that learning "to sew, and work with wool, and spin the wool. . . . brought to [her] the power of being sensible of [herself] as something human" (*Pierre*, p. 122). But while physical labor during childhood made Isabel conscious of the difference between herself and "lightning" or "a snake" (p. 122), in the city she surprisingly forgets this skill and only imagines parceling out her body piece by piece. In the country, Isabel's body has the potential for non-alienating labor that makes her feel fully human for the first time and potentially socializes her into a community, while New York apparently only offers the opportunity literally to sell her body. Melville's governing trope for understanding property relations in the city is prostitution, as he figures the body itself as an item for sale, piece by piece, bit by bit.

Just as the body becomes an item available for monetary exchange in New York, so too do writing and ideas. In the literary productions of Plotinus Plinlimmon and Charlie Millthorpe, Melville imagines authors who write with the specific intent of selling their work to have—like the prostitute Pierre meets his first night in the city—an "unnatural vivacity." Plinlimmon, "the Grand Master of a certain mystic Society," is depicted as an outright fraud who does not even write the pamphlets sold under his name. Those "sleazy works . . . were nothing more than his verbal things, taken down at random . . . by his young disciples" (*Pierre*, p. 290). And when offered books and stationery by a wealthy patron, Plinlimmon sniffs that he would prefer "a few jugs of choice Curaçoa," even though his sect prohibits such stimulants (p. 291). Like the "glaringly-arrayed" woman whose ladylike appearance initially masks her identity as a prostitute, Plinlimmon has "clothes [that] seemed to disguise this man"; indeed, as with the stereotypically "painted" woman, "his very face, the apparently natural glance of his very eye disguised this man" (p. 290). Through Plinlimmon's character, Melville imagines knowledge as a form of property that is easily devalued through counterfeiting, and, via the intense focus on Plinlimmon's face,

he again aligns commodification with an embodiment that agitates Pierre.[23]

While Plinlimmon is a vaguely threatening character whose inscrutable presence "began to domineer in a very remarkable manner upon Pierre" (*Pierre*, p. 292), Charlie Millthorpe is a more benign but equally hucksterish salesman of prose. Noticing Pierre's poverty, the affable Millthorpe advises him: "Stump the State on the Kantian Philosophy! A dollar a head, my boy! Pass round your beaver, and you'll get it" (p. 281). As Pierre grinds on with his doomed writing, Charlie teases that he has "finished ten metaphysical treatises," "accompanied our great Professor, Monsieur Volvoon," on a lyceum speaking tour, and "edited—anonymously, though—a learned, scientific work on 'The Precise Cause of the Modifications in the Undulatory Motion in Waves,'" all while Pierre "hammer[s] away at that one poor plaguy Inferno!" (p. 317). Through Millthorpe, Melville lampoons the conversion of knowledge into just another marketable commodity that preys on either the public's naïveté or its pretensions.

It is in Pierre's character, though, that Melville most explicitly conflates writing, the body, and the market. Faced with his astounding lack of skills upon leaving Saddle Meadows, Pierre has hopes for gaining a living that hinge upon "his presumed literary capabilities. For what else could he do?" (*Pierre*, p. 260). In describing Pierre's attempts to write a book for the literary market, Melville depicts some of literature's most harrowing scenes of bodily wasting. "Poor, frozen, blue-lipped" Pierre shivers in his unheated writing room while "his book, like a vast lumbering planet, revolves in his aching head." Unable to eat or sleep, "fain would he behead himself, to gain one night's repose" (p. 305). Struck by "a combined blindness, and vertigo," Pierre's tortured eyes finally give out on him, but Pierre only continues to sit helplessly in his room "for his usual term, suspended, motionless,

[23] For an illuminating alternative reading of the role of faces in *Pierre*, which focuses particularly on Plinlimmon and argues more generally that the novel's obsession with ambiguous faces figures forth Melville's own early 1850s writing crisis, see Elizabeth Renker, *Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996). Renker writes: "it is the invisibility of Moby-Dick's face that is most importantly lost in *Pierre*; that invisibility is what sustains the metaphysical quest that subsequently goes bankrupt in *Pierre*, as faces/pages emerge from invisible 'depth' to haunt the hero in the visual field" (*Strike through the Mask*, p. 26).

blank" (p. 341). In these scenes, writing books for money is an incredibly alienating experience that results only in the product of labor spinning painfully and uncontrollably in Pierre's head, literally within his body but tormentingly out of his control. Exactly how alienating Pierre finds writing for money is made clear when a magazine editor wishes to publish his image in an upcoming issue. The literary man "must have it" because, as an author, Pierre's image is "public property." "'Public property!' rejoined Pierre. . . . 'To the devil with you and your Daguerreotype!'" (p. 254). Pierre resists because the idea that his image belongs to the public means, in his mind, that it no longer belongs to himself. As Pierre moves from Saddle Meadows, where he blithely lit cigars with his sonnets and carelessly dropped manuscripts around the mansion (p. 263), to an urban scene in which writing is strictly a commodity, Melville depicts the effect of a market economy as an assault on Pierre's very selfhood. Writing for money produces a dual alienation, both from the written product of his bodily labor and from the public version of his self.

Coming from a writer who famously complained that "dollars damn [him]" because "what [he] feel[s] most moved to write . . . will not pay,"[24] and who allegorized the production of writing as a diabolical paper mill in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855), it is perhaps not surprising that the heavily autobiographical scenes of Pierre's writing depict the literary market as soul-killing. Indeed, this is why Gillian Brown identifies *Pierre* "as a keynote address to the program of literary individualism."[25] Arguing that Melville equates a feminized sentimentalism with the literary market and sees these forces as a hazard to the male writer's individualism, Brown does much to clarify how a mid-century, masculinist literary individualism created itself in response to domestic writing and sentimentalism.

Yet the final chapters of *Pierre* are surprising precisely because Pierre goes to such extraordinarily lengths to re-create a

[24] Herman Melville, letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, [1 June?] 1851, in *Correspondence*, p. 191.

[25] See Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), p. 137.

sentimentalized version of family in New York. Just when he and his sister-cum-wife Isabel settle into their dingy attic apartment, Lucy reappears. Begging to come and live with Pierre, and ironically using the language of marital nuptials, Lucy proposes to present herself as "some nun-like cousin immovably vowed to dwell with thee in thy strange exile" (*Pierre*, p. 310). In Gillian Brown's reading, this plot twist "approaches the point of the family's disappearance" and provides "familial support in the form of no family at all" (*Domestic Individualism*, p. 159). But if anything, Pierre is struggling mightily to create a family—wife, husband, brother, sister, cousin, mother—in which, quite possibly, no blood ties exist and in which there are certainly not enough people to play the several mentioned roles. Lucy writes to Pierre in her letter, asking to join him: "thou art my mother and my brothers, and all the world, and all heaven, and all the universe to me" (*Pierre*, p. 311). The family does not disappear; it strangely expands.

In fact, by imagining all interpersonal relations as familial relations, the New York scenes actually represent an effort to re-create the stability of identity and concomitant inalienability of property that were the defining features of Saddle Meadows. Isabel and Lucy are key in this regard. Lucy, Pierre's former fiancée, now wants only "one mute wooing of each other; with no declaration; no bridal" ceremony (*Pierre*, p. 310). Crucially, with no marriage, Lucy could make no claims to Glendinning property. And if Mary Glendinning had not disinherited Pierre, then Isabel, as Pierre's wife, would of course be the woman who would have a potential claim to the Glendinning property. But Isabel, as we learned earlier, has no interest in inheritance; describing her childhood to Pierre, she says: "The word father only seemed a word of general love and endearment to me—little or nothing more; it did not seem to involve any claims of any sort, one way or the other. I did not ask the name of my father; for I could have had no motive to hear him named" (p. 145). Isabel here becomes the perfect femme covert who will not disrupt any lines of family inheritance. As it turns out, then, both Lucy and Isabel are utterly committed to the security of property. Each woman eschews the possibility of making a claim that would remove property from the direct

Glendinning line, even as they are reconstituted into Pierre's alternative urban family.

The novel reaches its denouement when Pierre murders his cousin and new absentee owner of Saddle Meadows, Glen Stanly: "his own hand had extinguished his house in slaughtering the only unoutlawed human being by the name of Glendinning" (*Pierre*, p. 360). In this climatic scene, Pierre murders the man whom he believes has usurped his patrimony and who, Pierre earlier worried, would try to upset his newly remodeled family by kidnapping Lucy (p. 336). This bloodbath of an ending, coupled with the consequent deaths of Lucy, Isabel, and Pierre, strikes the final and significant blow for a fantasy of property's inviolability in *Pierre*. As Pierre kills the only "unoutlawed" Glendinning and poisons himself, the logic of inalienability is translated into a final chimera of property that exists outside of ownership. The ultimate security from expropriation for Saddle Meadows resides, ironically, in the absence of any possible claims.

In *Pierre*, as we have seen, the discourse of identity is inseparable from the forms of property relations. The novel limns out a fantasy of inalienable property in Saddle Meadows and a concomitant stable identity, but Melville simultaneously postulates that a rotten, originary violence is the guarantor of private property and its resultant identity. Outside of Saddle Meadows, however, commodification and market economics produce an identity that is divisible and alienable. In the final scenes Pierre, Lucy, and Isabel thus recoil to the putative stability of an inalienable property and an identity grounded in familial relations. The problem for Melville, though, is that the narrative wants to flee from exchange back into this notion of an unassailable property, but the whole idea of ownership itself is fundamentally polluted by the great-grandfather's original act of expropriative violence at Saddle Meadows. The end of the novel thus oscillates wildly between the horrors of a market economy, as represented in Pierre's dismal failure to write successfully for the market, and the desire, as represented in Pierre's improvised family, to reconstruct the stable identity that had been possible at Saddle Meadows. Melville's desperate solution comes in the book's excessive death toll at the end.

Identity is finally stabilized in the corpse, and, without owners, Saddle Meadows ceases to be property.

For Melville himself, impoverished son of a spendthrift father, descendant of great but largely inaccessible familial wealth, victim of monetary problems throughout his life, and notorious worrier about his public image, the appeal of property and identity that exist outside the forces of market economics is certainly understandable. But perhaps more interesting is Melville's ultimate unwillingness, or perhaps inability, to imagine identity outside some form of property relations, as in *Pierre* he chooses instead to kill off all of his principal characters. In this final ambiguity, we can perhaps see both Melville's desperate fear of economic failure in an increasingly market- and property-oriented country, and his equally desperate desire to succeed financially as a writer in that competitive world of market relations.

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ABSTRACT

Jeffory A. Clymer, "Property and Selfhood in Herman Melville's *Pierre*" (pp. 171–199)

In *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (1852) Herman Melville analyzes the intricacies of subjectivity and economics by way of two concrete and quite different forms of antebellum American property relations—the residual estates of the landed gentry in upstate New York and the emergent urban market economy of New York City. A condition of unassailability, of timelessness and imperviousness, infuses the family estate in *Pierre*, while incessant exchange characterizes the novel's urban finale. Taken together, these opposed economic arrangements represent Melville's meditation on how the very concept of alienability, the definitive aspect of modern property relations, impacted forms of non-slave identity in the antebellum United States. The condition of inalienability that structures the patrimonial estates presents the initially attractive possibility of removal from the turbulent world of property relations, exchange, and commodification, but it turns out to be an ideological fantasy supported primarily by violence and death. Melville, always one to brood about selfhood, and faced in *Pierre* with his realization of the rottenness at the core of his fantasy of a subjectivity not riven by alienability, responds with the novel's urban section. This second portion of the novel presents market relations as a horror wreaked principally on the self. *Pierre*, ultimately, represents Melville's monument to the desirability, and his dismay at the impossibility, of imagining identity outside the syntax of a market economy's version of property relations.

Keywords: Herman Melville; *Pierre*; Property; Selfhood; Economics