

Melville's England

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ABSTRACT

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Scholarship on Herman Melville has a tendency to treat the sea as a destination in itself, but in one of *Redburn's* autobiographical moments the narrator confesses that initially his “thoughts of the sea were connected with the land; but with fine old lands, full of mossy cathedrals and churches, and long, narrow, crooked streets without side-walks, and lined with strange houses” (45). When in literary trouble, Melville rebounded by employing the earliest furnishings of his imagination, using England as his setting and his theme. In his examination of the political, economic, and above all cultural ties between Britain and the United States, Melville anticipated the analytical models used by transatlanticist scholars today: At times he treated England and America as uncanny doubles and trips abroad as akin to time-travel, with each country seeing the other as both a point of origin and a vision of the future. Elsewhere, Melville tracked the circulation of people and objects throughout a unified—and dehumanized—Anglo-American world. Critics are often tempted to treat Melville's English writings, like his trips to England, as a vacation from his real work, but a deep engagement with British culture, and his attempt to write his way into it, *was* Melville's life's work. He is never writing only about England; produced at moments of professional crisis, Melville's transatlantic fictions include interrogations of the global marketplace and the possibilities for art. Through readings of *Redburn*, the diptych stories, and *Israel Potter*, this dissertation aims to explicate what Melville's English works have to say about England, America, commerce, art, and the author's own place in the British literary heritage he valued so highly.