

# Version and Document

## Conception and Design in the Editing of Revision

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### ABSTRACT

*I have two provocations to share: one theoretical, having to do with the revision text of Moby-Dick; the other practical, having to do with visualizing versions in the editing of Billy Budd. Both are rooted in the material and yet digital; both engage readers in creative interpretations of revision.*

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### I.

#### Conceptualizing Revision: Physical and Inferred Versions

IN *THE FLUID TEXT*, I ARGUE THAT WRITTEN WORKS NATURALLY exist as a sequence of versions, that each version and their collective sequencing have meaning, and that in editing these fluid texts — that is, works that exist in multiple versions — we should give readers fuller access to the kinds of revision — authorial, editorial, and adaptive — that generate the versions.

Melville's last prose work, *Billy Budd*, is an exemplary fluid text. It exists as a full manuscript with thousands of authorial revisions that are witness to various stages of composition and at least three discernible versions. In the past century, its text has been transcribed four times in scholarly editions, including most recently, the Melville Electronic Library digital edition (<https://melville.electroniclibrary.org/>); and each edition is itself a different transcription and a different version of the full manuscript text. Since 1940, the novella has also been adapted for opera, stage, and film, adding three other kinds of version to the work we call *Billy Budd*. I will speak more about this panoply of versions later. But to get a clearer sense of the problems that confront editors who want to strategize how we navi-

gate the changes evident in a fluid text, we need to recognize one fundamental: the phenomenon of revision is invisible. Granted, we can see revisions inscribed on a manuscript leaf or discern a textual change by comparing two variant print editions, but we cannot “see” the processes by which a writer, editor, or adaptor makes these changes. Those processes must be edited into visibility. The editing of revision is not just visualizing the sequences of revision that we may discern within a given set of revision sites; it is also a matter of narrativizing the sequence. Such revision narratives are a form of editorial annotation that offer critical hypotheses regarding the reasons behind a revision; they may touch upon mechanics, style, and rhetoric as well as embrace broader social, political, and aesthetic concerns.

The phenomenon of invisibility is also evident in versions. True, first and revised editions are tangible, visible documents in print (i.e., books) that contain the full text of that physical version. However, works that exist as heavily-revised drafts, like *Billy Budd*, are physical documents (i.e., a working manuscript) that contain layered texts of fragments of versions no longer visible in full, and these no longer extant full versions can only be inferred from the remnant texts that survive. Something like this dynamic interrelation between physical and inferred versions is also evident when all we have are the texts of books, and *Moby-Dick* demonstrates what I mean.

No scrap of manuscript of *Moby-Dick* has survived. As a historical document *Moby-Dick* exists as two significantly different first editions: British and American. Like other nineteenth-century writers seeking to minimize unauthorized transatlantic reprintings of their texts, and thereby maximize royalties, Melville arranged the copyrighting and near-simultaneous publication of his novel in both Britain and the United States. First, he had *Moby-Dick* typeset and printed in New York but held off marketing it in the States. He then sent a copy of the undistributed American book to London to be reset, printed, and published abroad in Britain. But, at the same time, he inscribed changes on this single copy: corrections of typos, modifications of wordings, a lengthy footnote (on the arcane word “gallied”) for the sake of British readers, perhaps a change in title, and other revisions. Melville’s British editor — Henry Milton — then copy-edited this revised American physical version and contributed other changes: not only small revisions in spelling and punctuation but also hundreds of expurgations regarding sexual, religious, and political content, at the word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter levels. This authorially and editorially revised single-volume version, which we know as *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*, was then

typeset from scratch and reformatted into three volumes, known as *The Whale; or Moby Dick*. Once the British *Whale* was published in London in October 1851, the American *Moby-Dick* was released in New York the following month. These two documents, and their variant texts, exist as physical versions representing the work we call *Moby-Dick*. However, the copy that Melville revised and his editor changed, censored, and re-set — the version that floats between the American and British versions — has not been found: Its physical existence — a collaboration of author and editor — can only be inferred.

The first step in visualizing the changes in this third, inferred *Moby-Dick* is by comparing the texts of the American and British physical documents, but this process of collation only gets you so far. Because this inferred version of *Moby-Dick* mingles Melville's authorial changes with subsequent (sometimes overlapping) editorial interventions, and because the physical evidence of Melville's and his editor's different inscriptions on this document are lost to us, we can distinguish these two types of revision — the inferred authorial and editorial versions — only through argumentation. Decades ago, scholarly editors performed the necessary collations to determine the broad scope of content variation, and in their textual notes, they offered arguments distinguishing selected authorial and editorial changes in their editions of *Moby-Dick*. But since such arguments are necessarily debatable and since conventional print editions relegate discussions of variants to the oblivion of the textual apparatus, scholars have had little encouragement to engage in a discourse on how *Moby-Dick* was transatlantically revised. More recent fluid-text editions of *Moby-Dick*, in print (Longman) and online (MEL), have developed strategies for visualizing both physical and inferred versions and have provided, in the form of the aforementioned revision narrative, a platform for discourse on the inferred authorial and editorial versions evident only through the collation of the physical American and British versions.

A revision narrative is a step-by-step explanation of how a revision came to be, essentially an argument supporting a hypothesis concerning a sequence of events. Revision sites in manuscripts like *Billy Budd* are invariably the scene of multiple steps lending themselves to multiple narratives. To accommodate this diversity of argumentation, a digital workspace (such as the digital editing tool TextLab developed for MEL by Performant Software)<sup>1</sup> is needed to facilitate the creation of differing sequences and narratives and to enable critical comparisons of their differences. The

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1. See <https://melville.electroniclibrary.org/textlab>.

same approach can be used to analyze revisions evident in collated print documents to enhance visibility of otherwise hidden inferred versions. A sampling of revision sites from the collation of *Moby-Dick* indicates the scholarly advantages of an interactive revision narrative platform.

In “The Mat-Maker” (Ch. 47), Melville replays the familiar trope of weaving as a metaphor for the intermingling in life of the vertical warp of necessity, the horizontal woof of free will, and the “sword” of chance (a slender wooden slat) used erratically to tamp woof threads into the warp. In the text of the American version, Ishmael describes the woof as being “directed by free-will”, but the British text changes the wording to “modified by free-will” (*my emphases*). The revision is meaningful: “directed” gives human will an agency that seems equal to the determinacy of necessity; whereas “modified” ambiguates the human role. Chances are that only Melville would feel empowered to make such a nuanced distinction, but if his editor, in keeping with a pattern of religious expurgations, sensed irreverence in characterizing free will as pridefully directive, that editor might have a stake in minimizing human agency and revising Melville’s text. Assuming the revision was Melville’s, the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition — which mixes American and British versions to create a third “eclectic” version of *Moby-Dick* — altered “directed” to “modified”. However, MEL’s edition of *Moby-Dick*, which does not mix versions, retains Melville’s original “directed”, but supplies a revision narrative that explains the arguments supporting both authorial and editorial hypotheses.

Just as editing itself is fundamentally a biographical enterprise, revision narratives are biographical miniatures sharply focused on single moments in Melville’s creative process. They articulate the energies at work as the writer shuttles back and forth between the identities of originating author and self-revising editor. At the same time, Melville’s British editor injects his textual identity into the mix, and the mingling of identities found in the lost inferred transatlantic version of *Moby-Dick* becomes the fabric for new kinds of reading. A second example from the novel further demonstrates the porosity of these roles and the impact on interpretation.

In “Loomings” (Ch. 1), Ishmael grumbles about being a lowly seaman having to endure the tyranny of a ship’s captain. He grudgingly submits to authority and, in the American edition, comically proclaims: “Who *aint* a slave?” (*my emphasis*). However, the British edition revises to “Who *is not* a slave?” (*my emphasis*). The amusing hypercorrection suggests a supercilious British grammarian at work, and nothing more. But grammar is politics, and the removal of “aint” also waters down Ishmael’s jocular identification with slave culture. It detracts not only from the humor but also the

complexity of Ishmael's empathy for the dispossessed, which is itself a biographical projection of Melville's own evolving black consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Let us, in our present moment in American culture, acknowledge the presumption of white Melville having his white (though outcast) narrator equate his maritime servitude with plantation slavery, while at the same time also recall the frequent comparison of sailor and slave conditions in antebellum American discourse (Otter 1999). This seemingly minor revision — regardless of who made it — is an opening onto the continuum of racial abuse, division, and tension in a culture's struggle with authority, economy, and democracy. In this broader historical context, the deletion of “aint” botches Melville's exposure of a deeper American class anxiety.

My initial inclination in wrestling with the textual fluidity of Ishmael's “aint” has been to blame a British editor for cleaning up Ishmael's language and removing his Black dialect. But a second revision scenario is that Melville might have corrected Ishmael's grammar himself, not for the sake of his British readers but to upgrade his narrator to the more patrician status that Ishmael elsewhere claims he once held. In short, I have two narratives overlapping in my understanding of one revision sequence. My point in adducing both options is two-fold. They demonstrate the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of distinguishing authorial and editorial identities. At the same time, they underscore the necessity, in our editing of fluid texts, for the airing of divergent hypotheticals. Determining the identity of an inferred version is achieved only through a discourse on the aesthetic and social dynamics embedded within acts of revision.

## II.

### **Visualizing and Textualizing Versions: *How Billy Grew***

In discussing physical and inferred versions, I have used terms introduced into the critical vocabulary of textual studies by G. Thomas Tanselle in his 1989 *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. They are “Work”, “Document”, and “Text”. To this venerable triad, I propose adding a fourth category — “Version” — as it helps us address the problem of the merging of visualization and textualization in the editing of a proposed digital feature I call *How Billy Grew*.

Let's briefly clarify Tanselle's triad. “Work” is the broadest term. It is not the material object you put on the shelf but a concept embracing the

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2. I pursue this strand in Melville's development throughout BRYANT 2021.

history of a writing project identified with a particular title as it develops. It can focus narrowly on the writer's intentions only, even as they may evolve through phases of composition and revision in manuscript and print; or more broadly to include non-authorized adaptations in various media. "Work" is not an idealized notion of the text; more pragmatically, it represents the corpus of materials associated with the identifiable writing venture. It is, in Paul Eggert's apt phrasing, "a regulative idea, the name or container, as it were, of the continuing dialectic" between document and text (2009, 235). Though conceptual, "Work" is critically useful; it enables us to comprehend the two physical and two inferred versions of *Moby-Dick* as four moments in the making of one thing.

"Document" more concretely designates the collocation of material objects related to the conceptual Work. As documents, the American and British first editions of *Moby-Dick* are physical versions, but from them we recognize the existence of a third document bearing two other inferred versions — the lost copy of *Moby-Dick* containing Melville's revisions and the British interventions. What enables our inference is the triad's third term "Text". By collating the texts of the two physical versions, we infer from the textual variants both authorial and editorial changes. While certain pairings of variants — like *aint / is not* and *directed / modified* — are the visible endpoints of a revision, the process of textual evolution linking one to the other is invisible. This immaterial phenomenon of revision can be *visualized* only so far as the revision Texts are physically present in print. Determining who transformed one word into the other and how versions evolve requires argument, interpretation, and judgment; the transformation is a matter of discourse; it is best achieved when it is *textualized*.

The point of my ontological provocation is that if we design an edition to represent the revision Texts of a Work manifested in Documents, we must add to Tanselle's triad of Work, Document, and Text the critical category of Version. And if, in editing, we give material presence to the immaterial phenomenon of Versions, we invariably do so by combining visualization and textualization. That is, an edition will include visual representations of a work's documents (digital images, graphic illustrations) as well as textual representations of its versions (transcriptions, revision sequences, and narratives). This proposed ontological tetrad — Work, Version, Document, Text — should facilitate discussion of the fluid text as an idea. But it is also helpful in imagining MEL's proposed digital feature *How Billy Grew*, and how strategies of visualization and textualization might interact.

*How Billy Grew* is a What-If. Imagine an edition of Melville's last Work *Billy Budd* that would enable readers to visualize how Melville's Text

evolved through three Versions evident on one manuscript Document of many leaves and yet spelunk through each version, leaf by leaf, to inspect revision texts and interact with them by creating revision sequences and narratives. Easier said than done; in fact, not even easily said. *Billy Budd* is easily the most difficult document in the Melville corpus.

*Billy Budd* grew through three versions. It began as a ballad sung by Billy, a mature sailor about to be hanged for mutiny. Melville first replaced the brief prose head note that introduced the poem with several chapters that transformed Billy into a younger, handsome sailor and the victim of false accusation. In a second expansion, he added more chapters on Billy's false accuser, the envious, inexplicably duplicitous John Claggart, whom Billy inadvertently kills. A third expansion develops the fatherly Captain Vere, his misconceived drumhead trial and conviction of Billy, and Billy's execution.

These three versions are discernible only through analysis of the *Billy Budd* manuscript. This 360-leaf document is a challenge. Many leaves consist of cut-and-paste fragments clipped from earlier versions. Most leaves show how Melville revised his page numbers to accommodate his interleaf expansions. In their 1962 genetic edition, Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts transcribed each leaf, identified at least eight stages of composition running through the three versions, and charted Melville's renumbering of leaves. But while these charts visualize overlapping stages, their individual leaf transcriptions, encrusted with genetic symbols, represent only one revision sequence and provide no revision narratives. Hobbled by the limits of print technology, the 1962 Hayford-Sealts edition displays only a handful of leaf images, so that readers have no way to test the accuracy edition's transcriptions or sequencings, or to create their own alternative sequences or narratives. The edition's attempt to visualize and textualize Melville's revision process in an integrated way resulted in a genetic transcription so challenging as to be unreadable.

MEL's 2019 digital edition of *Billy Budd* substantially improves reader interaction with the manuscript, visually and textually. With TextLab, it encodes revision sites on each leaf image, creates a visual display pairing leaf image and "diplomatic transcription" making each leaf legible, and assists editors in generating textual annotations in the form of revision sequences and narratives. MEL's reading text of *Billy Budd* includes marginal links to these TextLab features giving readers access to the diplomatic transcription and its revision sequences and narratives as they critically assess Melville's creation of his "inside narrative". MEL's digital edition of *Billy Budd* is an

unprecedented combination of visualized and textualized features. But it is not enough.

While readers have access to Melville's micro-revisions on each leaf, they cannot place them in the context of the macro-revisions spread out over the three versions and eight compositional stages that demonstrate how *Billy Budd* grew. As I naively imagined it in the 1900s, the *How Billy Grew* project would be a moving picture representing expansions and contractions of manuscript leaves from poem to novella. I imagined each leaf as a flipbook of revision, and somehow all 360 flipbooks would flip in some sort of way to represent the stages and versions of *Billy Budd* growing. Imagine shuffling 360 decks of cards: The metaphor was not realizable.

Even if such a visualization could accurately depict macro-revision, it would have no critical utility unless users were able to pause the flipbook in order not only to inspect but interact with elements within each frame of the movie: the individual leaves, their micro-revisions, their linked revision sequences and narratives. Nor would this visualization enable us to step back from the flipbook in order to manipulate sets of leaves virtually, as one might attempt the felonious handling of the original document, in a reading room, when librarians are not looking. What is wanted then is the ability to regroup leaves by Melville's different sets of renumbered leaves to emulate the content of versions and stages of composition. Imagine as well detaching Melville's cut-and-paste fragments and reassembling them to approximate the texts and documents of earlier versions. Imagine further the ability to sort leaves by more specific attributes, such as inscription in pencil or ink; imagine being able to slice up the digital leaf images by word, letter, false start, caret, and comma, and putting them side-by-side to analyze Melville's hand.

Such virtual disintegrations and re-integrations of a physical document are precisely the kinds of inspection needed to sharpen our skills of inference in identifying otherwise invisible, inferred versions embedded within physical documents. While TextLab generates the texts of MEL's editions from semantic markup that follows the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) Guidelines, the *How Billy Grew* project requires a database that can atomize visual and textual materials sufficiently for the kinds of critical disintegrations and re-integrations the project would enable. Already, archaeologists and biblical scholars seeking to compare texts on fragments of clay or on tattered papyri and parchment have been able to perform such manipulations using OCHRE, the University of Chicago's highly atomized database system that supports all projects in CEDAR, Chicago's digital initiative. In joining CEDAR, MEL has access to this OCHRE technology, and we can

now begin to imagine how *How Billy Grew* might actually grow beyond flipbook fantasies toward digital design. Of course, such a digital provocation is like Ishmael's attempt to build his Cetology: It is only now a matter of "time, strength, cash, and patience."

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