

The Fluid Text

A Theory of Revision and Editing for
Book and Screen



John Bryant

Ann Arbor

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In Memory of Doris H. Bryant
(1924–2001)
and
Some of the Women She Touched
Paula, Cerise, Emma, Eliza, and Liana

Acknowledgments



My first inkling that literary works are fluid texts came in college at the University of Chicago while studying Whitman with James E. Miller Jr., whose parallel text edition of “Song of Myself” continues to inspire me in finding ways of giving readers access to textual fluidity. Later, in 1973 and still at Chicago, I found myself unexpectedly entangled in a textual project involving Swinburne manuscripts under the direction of Jerome J. McGann, himself newly entangled in editing Byron. Later still, while researching Melville, I would drift uptown to the Newberry Library to confer with Harrison Hayford, who from time to time would drift down from Northwestern to conduct the making of his magisterial edition of *The Writings of Herman Melville*. These scholars and friends—along with others, including Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill—shaped and encouraged my early respect and interest in textual editing. But it was not until the discovery in 1983 of the *Typee* manuscript that I was able to find a textual project of my own, and one that would take me deeper into Melville manuscripts and the problem of textual fluidity in general. At this point and for years to come, I received the generous guidance and encouragement from Hayford as well as manuscript specialist Robert C. Ryan and textual scholar and theorist G. Thomas Tanselle. I am also indebted to Leslie Morris of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, and especially Mimi Bowling, former head of the manuscripts division at the New York Public Library, whose warmth of spirit and generosity in giving me access to the *Typee* manuscript and other papers surely hastened my labors in transcription and manuscript analysis.

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Introduction

The Fluid Text



The fluid text is a fact, not a theory.

This claim may be mystifying if you are unclear about my use of *fluid*; or arrogantly retrogressive if you suspect that I may be some foggy putting *fact* as a chip on my shoulder to upbraid critical theorists (and I am not); or philosophically naive for carelessly assuming that facts do “in fact” exist as something more objective than selected bits of data shaped by a theory. I anticipate this unease over words like *fluid*, *fact*, and *theory*, but I need them to make a point about *text*.

Simply put, a fluid text is any literary work that exists in more than one version. It is “fluid” because the versions flow from one to another. Truth be told, all works—because of the nature of texts and creativity—are fluid texts. Not only is this fluidity the inherent condition of any written document; it is inherent in the phenomenon of writing itself. That is, writing is fundamentally an arbitrary hence unstable hence variable approximation of thought. Moreover, we revise words to make them more closely approximate our thoughts, which in turn evolve as we write. And this condition and phenomenon of textual fluidity is not a theoretical supposition; it is fact.

Literary works invariably exist in more than one version, either in early manuscript forms, subsequent print editions, or even adaptations in other media with or without the author’s consent. The processes of authorial, editorial, and cultural revision that create these versions are inescapable elements of the literary phenomenon, and if we are to understand how writing and the transmission of literary works operate in the processes of meaning making, we need first to recognize this fact

of fluidity and also devise critical approaches, and a critical vocabulary, that will allow us to talk about the meaning of textual fluidity in writing and in culture.

In due course, and despite my claim that the fluid text is a fact not a theory, I will be theorizing about the fluid nature of literary phenomena in ways that I hope will be useful to scholars, critics, teachers, and those lucky enough to see themselves as all three. My goal is to challenge our tendency to define a material text—and by that I mean the physical writing on the page—as a fixed thing, and to suggest new ways of reading, interpreting, and teaching. This is not an easy task because literary theory and critical practice of the past century have built their work upon the general assumption that, while the texts we read may be infinitely interpretable, the material texts themselves (“received” from publishers and scholars and frozen into print) are, for all intents and purposes, static and that multiple versions of a given work are either anomalous corruptions with no real critical relevance or at best simply “other” texts to be treated separately. Modern readers, including critics and even many scholars, typically assume that the “job” of textual scholarship—we dare not call it art—is to sift through this corruption and “otherness” and establish an authoritative or definitive text for common use. But when we inspect the causes of this “textuality” (to lift for a moment another critic’s portmanteau),¹ we find more than just the accidents of textual transmission; we begin to envision a fuller phenomenon, tied to historical moments but always changing and always manifesting one set of interests or another. The very nature of writing, the creative process, and shifting intentionality, as well as the powerful social forces that occasion translation, adaptation, and censorship among readers—in short, the facts of revision, publication, and reception—urge us to recognize that the only “definitive text” is a multiplicity of texts, or rather, the fluid text.

No doubt readers gravitate to so-called definitive texts because they desire the cultural creature comforts that definitive texts propose to offer: authenticity, authority, exactitude, singularity, fixity in the midst of the inherent indeterminacy of language. We are happy to acknowledge that any single text can yield up multiple interpretations; but the mind resists the thought that single literary works are themselves multi-form, that they exist in various and varied physical states, each capable of yielding its own set of interpretations. We assume that because there once was a body called William Shakespeare, there is similarly only one

body of work called “Shakespeare,” and we expect *Lear* to be *Lear*. And yet there are variant *Lears*, not simply because that play has been interpreted differently in essays and books or even in multiple performances, but because the text of *Lear* in the Folio is radically different from that in the Quarto. Still, we expect one *Lear*, indeed want one *Lear*, and hundreds of years of editing have worked toward trying to insist upon one *Lear*.

Similarly, and to use the test text before us in this book, we want there to be one book by Herman Melville called *Typee*, even though the history of that literary work shows that the writer conceived of it and printed it in different versions. Now, it is easy enough to show that this gravitation toward a fixed or “definitive” text is an enormous blindness in our critical thinking² but quite another thing to ask scholars, critics, and teachers to take on yet another layer of indeterminacy in the process of reading by embracing rather than denying the fact of something called the fluid text. But that “little lower layer” of indeterminacy (as the writer of *Moby-Dick* might say) is a richer one that allows us a sharper vision of the evolution of texts and how writers, readers, and cultures interact.

Here, then, are some “facts” about the “fluidity” of literary phenomena. Writing is a process,³ and a literary work evolves through various stages of revision in that process from the earliest creative moments of mental transcription (when writers make up words in the mind and transfer them on the page) to moments of publication and on to moments of adaptation in other media. The literary work also appears in different material manifestations throughout its existence: working drafts, fair copies, proofs, and authorized commercial editions. But textual fluidity does not end here. In the hands of readers a text’s material presence changes in other ways through censorings, bowdlerizations, translations, adaptations, and even scholarly editions. These variant material manifestations of a literary work are not the exceptional cases; they are the rule, from the Bible to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Donne; from Wordsworth to Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, and Marianne Moore; from *Moby-Dick* and *Clotel* (our first African-American novel) to *The Red Badge of Courage*, various works by Faulkner, and Raymond Carver’s early tales; from Dickinson and Whitman to Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, and Anne Frank. The list of fluid texts is so full as to constitute all of literature.⁴ In fact, a good game to play is to try to find a text that is *not* fluid, one that has *not* changed materially, and in significant ways,

over the years for some reason or another. I have seen changes carved on gravestones and am thus inclined to stick to my claim that the fluid text is a fact not a theory.

The textual condition—encompassing the processes of creation, editing, printing, and adaptation—is fundamentally fluid not because specific words lend themselves to different meanings or that different minds will interpret the words fixed on a page in different ways, but because writers, editors, publishers, translators, digesters, and adapters change those words materially. Moreover, these material revisions can attest not simply to localized fine-tunings but to new conceptualizations of the entire work. Thus, a literary work invariably evolves, by the collaborative forces of individuals and the culture, from one version to another. If we are to know the textual condition, we must get to the versions of a text, and there we will also find an even deeper condition of creativity within a culture. But the problem is that we generally have only partial access—often no access—to those versions. That is, the erasures, cancellations, and insertions on a manuscript, or the blue-pencilings of an editor, which are the manifestations of revision, are frequently lost to us, so that the prepublication versions of a work in particular come to us as hypotheticals. We can only speculate, then, on the flow of thought that eventuated in these inferred versions, and speculation is not a comfortable place to be. The irony is that the more one perceives the variable materiality of a text—let us say even a mere scrap of revised manuscript—the more one begins to focus on the immaterial processes of change that create the variances, the flow of texts. Our perception of texts as material objects ineluctably leads to an apperception of fluidity. But how does one treat this textual condition culturally, critically, pedagogically, and editorially?

The multiplicity of versions is not a condition one can wish away, for authorial, editorial, and cultural revision is in the nature of literary phenomena; nor is it merely a corruption to “correct” (unless the variation happens to be an obvious error, like the word *obvious* earlier in this sentence). Rather, it is something to celebrate, study, and interpret. In one important instance from the *Typee* manuscript, we find Melville altering the words *savage* and *native* to *islander*. This single pattern of material difference in word choice may have “triggered” an expansion in Melville’s awareness of internalized imperialist structures he was beginning to call into question as he wrote. More certain is that the pattern implies a *strategy of revision* that can be a critical “sign” of Melville’s

expanding consciousness and rhetorical condition. Of course, readers of a print-text version of *Typee* that provides no textual apparatus will see only the word *islander* and not its hidden variant (*savage*); thus, these changes and strategies, as well as the fragile and tentative nature of textuality, are not an issue to them and do not affect their ways of reading. Nevertheless, once we are made aware that a given print-text (*islander*) is just the trace of an earlier process of revision (involving *savage*), we lean into that print-text more closely with a new set of worries and wonders. What are the variant meanings of the variant texts; what is the meaning of their difference; what are the causes of this revision; is there any meaning in the fact that this pattern of revision occurred here and not there? And what, we might also ask, was Melville thinking? What was the *intent* behind the revision?

The problems of pursuing the critical relevance of textual fluidity are admittedly monumental. It can be argued that even with manuscript evidence in hand, the reader has no real access to Melville's thought processes, which like all mental acts are irretrievable. Writers, editors, and censorious readers may be the efficient causes of revision throughout the history of a text, and we might to some extent plumb their intentions, but the process of revision itself can only be inferred from fossil texts residing in certain documents, and like paleoanthropologists we must resort to supplying fabricated flesh and bone to render an approximation of evolution. Like them, we can only construct a history. How, then, might our investigation of the fluidity behind a print-text seriously impact upon one's reading of that print-text?

Fluidity is an inherent condition of textuality familiar to all textual scholars, less so to the interpreters of texts: theorists, critics, and historicists. As a result, interpretive communities have yet to establish critical standards for the discussion of the phenomenon. Some refer to this condition of fluidity as *textual instability*, but this phrasing implies a teleological perspective I want to avoid.⁵ A text may vary radically from one version to the next, yielding significant interpretive differences. And our tendency is to want to stabilize this instability and determine once and for all the primacy of one version (usually the latest one before printing occurs) over the other. The teleological assumption, here, is that revision is a mode of aesthetic improvement and the fulfillment of an author's previously inchoate but now realized intentions. But in many cases, such as Melville's wavering between the words *savage* and *islander*, the change is essentially multivalent, revealing the writer's

human condition of doubt that is inherently perhaps irresolvably ambivalent (not resolvably unstable), and one that if made known to readers becomes a sign of a culture's deepest ambivalences as well. Melville wavers, perhaps, because in 1845 at the time he composed *Typee* he was (through the process of writing itself) interrogating certain "savageries" of his past life in Polynesia just as his reaction to Western culture's savage imperialism against island cultures was beginning to call into question complacent assumptions about the idea of civilization. In this and innumerable other instances print-texts conceal radically irresolvable textual fluidity.

Scholars have also referred to textual fluidity as *indeterminacy*, which is a fair expression for Melville's *savage/islander* quandary, but this term also has its limitations, for we know that writers and editors can be quite determined in their word choice with one audience in mind at one moment, and quite determined at a later time or circumstance in changing that wording. Some of Shakespeare's plays, if we give authority to his so-called foul papers and previously much maligned quarto editions, include a vast array of variants suggesting the playwright's and players' attempts to accommodate different audiences. The rhetorical strategies inherent in these revisions are anything but indeterminate. Nor was Wordsworth indeterminate or unstable (for a poet, at any rate) when he took fifty years to write his *Prelude*, which exists in at least three authorial versions; and Whitman's sequential editions of *Leaves of Grass* from 1855 to 1892 were quite determinate both in their adding and dropping of poems and in their revisions of surviving poems.

I prefer to call these apparent instabilities and indeterminacies *textual fluidities* because the surviving variant texts, when taken together, give us a vivid material impression of the *flow* of creativity, both authorial and editorial, that constitutes the cultural phenomenon of writing. Notice that I extend the "flow of creativity" beyond the prepublication realms of the single writer writing in relative isolation to embrace subsequent postpublication kinds of "writers," namely editors. By *editor* I mean anyone—friends, family, professional and scholarly editors, publishers, even adapters—who in the course of the history of a given work lays hands upon that text to shape it in new ways. By making this extension into what is now referred to as the *social text*, I do not want to diminish the exciting creative impulses of individual writers as manifest in their manuscripts or authorized print-text revisions; I simply want to expand the horizon of creativity, normally a preserve for the writers who

originate literary works, to include those readers who also materially alter texts. Our acceptance of this community of single writers and collaborators is crucial to fluid-text analysis, but current editorial theory, both intentionalist and materialist, tends—I think unnecessarily—to segregate these different kinds of creators. In chapters 1, 2, and 3, I draw upon elements in both theories to argue for a more integrated approach.

One point I hope to make is that if in the study of fluid texts we admit to a larger and broader community of writers, we must become all the more vigilant in not allowing ourselves to homogenize that community of collaborators. To understand the nature and specifics of “multiple authorship,” we need to know who wrote what and when; we need to clarify one set of intentions from another. This means addressing two controversial matters: collaboration and intentionality.

Our most immediate notion of “collaboration” is that texts come into being with two or more individuals laboring together shoulder to shoulder (like lyricist and composer at the piano) as a single sensibility, but in fact that practice almost never happens.⁶ Most collaboration derives from conflict. Indeed, a major cause of textual fluidity derives from the conflicting sensibilities of collaborators, both friendly and adversarial. Collaborators act primarily as “second readers,” the first reader being the writer writing. That is, these second readers take a writer’s work and provide new perspectives by suggesting changes; in some cases, they demand changes. Often they get those changes. It is well known that successive editors, male and female, have altered (some might say mutilated) Dickinson’s poems, that Dreiser’s friends urged him to cut *Sister Carrie* drastically; that Pound helped Eliot carve away lengthy portions of *The Waste Land*; that Maxwell Perkins molded Thomas Wolfe’s novels out of cartloads of typescript; that Richard Wright desexed *Native Son* for the Book-of-the-Month Club, that Gordon Lish pared Raymond Carver down to a minimalist; and that various posthumous Hemingway books are the product of marketplace editors. In virtually all these cases, the “collaborators” do not work together from the inception of the project; rather, the collaboration begins with one person acting as an editor to shape what a principal writer has written. Thus, I am nervous about bestowing upon such editorial figures the status of authorial collaborator, since authorship implies a kind of unified, originary role not played by most collaborators. I would rather call these agents of textual fluidity *editors*, but this is problematic

because we think of editors (erroneously I think) as functionaries in the marketplace or academe, not creative associates to whom a writer goes for feedback and suggested revision, midwives, not birth-mothers. Nevertheless, I plan to stick to this word *editor* (rather than collaborator) and use it in this broader sense in hopes that it will allow us to look more carefully at the complex of interacting intentions between writer and editor in the flow of their sometimes synergistic sometimes oppositional creativities.

I have also found that one cannot talk about fluid texts without some consideration of intentionality. This, of course, is heresy. One need not rehearse the history of criticism to realize that modern approaches to literature—formalism, poststructuralism, new historicism—have removed creative process, intentionality, and (most famously) authorship itself from the playing fields of interpretation. If texts cohere, deconstruct, or reveal the imprint of ideology, they do so, according to current theory, because of the nature of signification or of a reader's response or of a culture's "political unconscious," not through the conscious agency of an individual writer. It is, of course, a truism that we cannot retrieve the creative process, nor, according to the "intentional fallacy," can we use some magically derived sense of an writer's intentions as a validation of or substitute for an interpretation of a text.⁷ But in the past century, some advocates of this tenet have grown so doctrinaire as to commit what might be called the Intentional Fallacy Fallacy, which is essentially to imagine that because intentions have no critical relevance they are not even discussable.⁸ Of course, intentions exist; they are an unalienable element in letters, love, and law, and once announced or perceived in some way, they tend to be the *only* topic of discussion. With the fluid text featured in this book, I will be speculating on intentions quite a bit in order to construct, not retrieve, the history of a process of writing called *Typee*. And to do this, I need to establish the ways in which concepts such as intention, creativity, and writer (if not "author") are not only discussable but have critical utility.

To be sure, recognition of the intentional fallacy has helped facilitate the largely positive transformation of literary interpretation from the worship of canonized "geniuses" into an act of analysis, but certain babies have been tossed out with that belletristic bathwater. While a reader's interpretation exists independently from a writer's intentions, we know that the writer intended certain acts of revision, and that if articulated in our critical pursuits, even as a speculation, these intended

acts of revision have no less of a place in the discourse on literary meaning than any other set of hermeneutic acts we might construct while contemplating a string of words. But textual fluidity offers a more focused perspective on intentionality that allows us to sharpen the dimensions of speculation. Fluid texts are the material evidence of *shifting* intentions. Indeed, the fact of revision manifests the intent to alter meaning. We may not presume to know precisely what Melville intended to mean by *savage* or *islander*, but we know that his change from one to the other is itself conscious and meaningful. This awareness enables us to place more useful boundaries on speculation. And, with our construction of a strategy out of Melville's intended revision in mind, we can also more carefully speculate upon the ways our awareness of textual fluidity may affect the ways we read a text and a culture.

A fluid text bodies forth concrete instances of an idiosyncratic individual negotiating idiosyncratically with an audience. Such idiosyncrasies cannot represent a culture, but as a particularized instance of cultural engagement, they may be seen in their peculiarity as a concrete enactment of a culture. Thus, textual fluidities are more than just small moments in (an otherwise critically irrelevant) biography; they are a graphic manifestation of the discourses of self, word, and society. Despite this critical potential, most critics are in denial about the fluid text. Of course, critics of various generations have drawn upon evidence of revision to glimpse (what Foucault appropriately reviled as) "the author in the workshop" or promote a particular biographical reading. My purpose here is to explore deeper critical and cultural potentials derived from revision implicit in textual fluidity. Exactly why textual fluidity has been largely ignored may have a great deal to do with the problem of access. Evidence of textual fluidity often exists in rare books and unique manuscripts that are hard enough to locate let alone use without collation and transcription. Moreover, the mechanics and economics of publishing such scholarly materials effectively are often prohibitive, even in the computer age. Despite efforts in the past decades to make textual fluidity more accessible in the graduate schools if not among the general public, fluid texts have not been analyzed much as fluid texts because scholarly editions (the repositories of textual fluidity) tend to showcase single "clear reading" texts; the evidence of revision is invariably marginalized in the editorial notes and apparatus. But the critical denial of textual fluidity is also rooted in deeper matters, such as the dismissal of "authorship" in current poststructuralist and new historicist theory.