

INTRODUCTION

Unfoldings and Agendas

Either I accept Lucretius and conclude that some demonic and irreversible mutation is taking place in my inmost depths, or I go with Ovid and concede that everything now emerging is no more than a manifestation of what was already there.

—Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*

IN JUNE 1851, the celebrated writer Herman Melville, thirty-one years of age, found himself embarking upon midlife: exhilarated and exhausted; full of possibilities, full of doubt. He had spent four years at sea first as a whaler and then as a sailor in the U.S. Navy. Within a year of his return home in 1844, he had begun to write, and in 1846 he burst upon the literary scene in both England and America with a travel-adventure-romance called *Typee*. It was a fresh, spirited, amusing, daring, and controversial account of the writer's sojourn among South Pacific "cannibals," and despite its irreverence, or perhaps because of it, *Typee* had made Melville a promising, popular writer with a distinctive American voice. Now, in 1851 with five books behind him, the writer was struggling to complete his most ambitious offering to date: *Moby-Dick*. The book, once published, would be hailed by admirers as a prose-poem, but it quickly became a famous flop in the marketplace, and it signaled a decline in Melville's reputation that, in his lifetime, he would never manage to reverse. He was, in June 1851, not only embarking on midlife; he was, whether he knew it or not, suddenly in midcareer, and about to fail.

Ten years earlier, the celebrated poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, thirty-five years of age, had also found himself in midlife and midcareer. In a seemingly effortless, deceptively ditty-like sonnet called "*Mezzo Cammin*," Longfellow depicted himself aspiring "to build / Some tower of song" but

was inhibited in that effort by “sorrow, and a care that almost killed.” Situated midway up a hill, looking back at the town below, Longfellow hears “the cataract of Death” above him. And there the poem ends. Longfellow, who had suffered the loss of his first wife and endured bouts of hysterical blindness, figured himself in life’s “mid-journey” like Dante in the anxious opening line of the *Divine Comedy*—“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita”—he was ascending toward the cataracts of death and was positioned for a descent into hell.

Two writers in midcareer, confronting the anxiety of their art: for them, each writing project enacts a midlife crisis. Longfellow was lucky; his career soared despite his depression. His brilliance lay in his facility for pushing his personal inferno—what Whitman called the “sweet hell within”—beneath the surface of exasperatingly superficial lines. A great talent, Longfellow met his demons with tight verse, survived the care that almost killed, got back on the road of his journey, and ended up not America’s Dante (although he was Dante’s American translator) but a versifier revered on both sides of the Atlantic nevertheless. Melville was not so lucky. He kept his Dante too close at hand and chose to inhabit the Dantesque in his next novel, *Pierre*, a work so psychologically, spiritually, morally, and stylistically repulsive to reviewers already confused by *Moby-Dick*, that it was the final blow to the writer’s career. Five years later, after composing such varied and incisive fictions as “Bartleby,” “The Paradise of Bachelor, and the Tartarus of Maids,” “Benito Cereno,” and *The Confidence-Man*, Melville gave up fiction writing altogether. Instead, he wrote poems but, unlike Longfellow, was rejected, even reviled, then forgotten.

Of course, in June 1851, Melville had no awareness of the downward slope his career was about to take. Nor did he see himself treading Longfellow’s Journey of Life. (He seemed constitutionally unable to engage in platitudes, or to write, as he put it, in that “*other way*.”) Instead, he saw his life as a flower, a rose perhaps, a tight bud unfolding its layered petals. Here is how the thirty-one-year-old writer, pausing in the composition of *Moby-Dick*, expressed his midlife condition to Hawthorne:

Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself. But I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould.¹

Retrospection, then the exhilaration and exhaustion of self-discovery, then foreboding are all dynamically interfused in this unexpected image of a flower unfolding. Melville is at Longfellow's Janus point, looking back, looking forward, but not freezing himself in past sentiments of the forsaken town or future anticipations of the cataracts of death. Rather, he is fully in the moment of his own unfolding, a "then and now" of perpetual forward-going retrospection. How long can the moment last; what exactly is this unfolding?

We can hardly grasp the image he offers: is this unfolding flower in fact a rose of layered petals, or is it more like a tulip sprung from its onion-like bulb? Either way, the flower, fated to wither and die, seems too easily allegorical, and soon enough we discern that the flower itself is not the point at all. Indeed, images themselves—picture a mountain, town, or cataract; picture a flower; picture an island paradise or a whale—cannot fully render whatever meaning they seem to want to give. Finally, the iconic flower is less important than the invisible process of its "unfolding," as though the "inmost" me resides not in the layers themselves but in the peeling away of layers, the exposure of one's being to one's consciousness, the process of self-discovery. All the more intriguing is that Melville imagines his "development" not as walking up Longfellow's hill, or as a building up of the tissues of muscle or brain, but as an engagement with preexisting layers of himself, the foldings of his sexual, familial, political, and cultural states of mind, the stuff of his being plied on from birth through adolescence. And astonishingly enough, or perhaps all too obviously, this process of peeling away instead of building, this act of unfolding, was effected through the process of writing, the layering of words on leaves of paper.

This is not, however, how Melville's famous statement to Hawthorne has been interpreted. In the past, scholars and critics drawn to this image of Melville's unfolding have stressed its relation to the "now" of 1851, that is, the philosophical deep-diving he was performing in *Moby-Dick* and the exhaustion of his creativity.² But I want to stress the "then" in Melville's letter and how it designates his "twenty-fifth year," six years before *Moby-Dick* in 1845, back when Melville began writing his first book, *Typee*: the beginning of his perpetual unfolding.

This may have been Melville's most protean year. One day he was a South Seas sailor sitting well-tanned in his mother's parlor telling anecdotes to family and friends; then a few weeks later he was a writer. As he wrote, he constructed images of his recent past; he transcribed memory into language. He revised; and in revising, he altered the memories, his notions of his recent

past, and himself. And by creating verbal versions of himself, he discovered selves, new leaves of himself he had not previously known. For Melville, writing was unfolding. And, in 1845, the “inmost leaf” was just as much another leaf of paper on which to write as it was, in 1851, a flower image of himself.

Melville Unfolding takes its title from this crucial starting point in Melville’s writing life and focuses on Melville’s first “unfoldings” performed during the making of *Typee*. It shows how we might read these unfoldings as several versions of a “fluid text,” and how they might help us more fully understand the writer in relation to himself and his culture. At the same time, the book attempts to demonstrate a kind of reading I call “fluid-text analysis” and a kind of editing I call “fluid-text editing.”

A fluid text is any work that exists in multiple versions due to authorial, editorial, or cultural revision, and my theorizing on this literary phenomenon is laid out in *The Fluid Text* (University of Michigan Press, 2002). In that book, I argue several points that I shall revisit in this introductory section and build upon in subsequent chapters: that writing is a process; that a literary “work” is not just a final print version published but the full range of revisions occurring before and even after initial publication; that patterns of revision reveal a writer’s “revision strategies,” which give us a clearer sense of the writer’s shifting intentions; and that an analytical “narrative of revision” can be constructed as a critical means of assessing not simply a writer’s development but the dynamics of an individual writer’s acceptance of or resistance to the ideology of a culture. At the same time *Melville Unfolding* integrates critical analysis with an innovative approach to the editing of the revision process so that readers of my analysis may have fuller and more immediate access to Melville’s fluid text and therefore the evidence in support of that analysis.

All this seems a lot to chew, and it is, for much can happen in a single revision or “unfolding,” not to mention the thousand or so interrelated unfoldings found in Melville’s revisions of *Typee*. And since practical criticism, that is, the construction of meaning out of Melville’s fluid text, and not a theory of fluid texts is the issue here, I will not belabor what I have theorized in *The Fluid Text* but rather employ the critical vocabulary established in that book in such a way that the theory may seem to come to life and the reader may gain a fuller sense of my agenda.

Or should I say agendas. In *Melville Unfolding*, I hope to lure four readerships toward a different way of looking at Melville, editing, literary criticism, and reading. Again, a lot to chew. For Melvilleans, who know *Typee*

well, this book provides a new text for three crucial chapters in Melville's first novel, based on Melville's recently discovered working draft manuscript. For textual scholars, I offer a new genre of the "critical edition," what I call a fluid-text edition, that showcases revision through a synergistic interplay of book and electronic media. For literary critics, my hope is to show how a fluid-text approach to this manuscript not only gives us *access* to more of Melville but also allows us a new way to *witness* the interactions of writer and culture. And for general readers and students, I hope this book will show that the increased access to fluid texts allows us to experience the "pleasures of the fluid text" and thereby learn more concretely how to read any text "historically," especially in a transnational and multicultural world.

In the three introductory chapters that follow, I want to elaborate on these audiences and agendas, not simply to establish what is at stake in fluid-text analysis but also to provide some necessary particulars regarding the unfoldings of Melville's creative process, his earliest growth as an artist, and the astonishing "inmost leaves" of the *Typee* manuscript.