

# White Paper Report

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## ***FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT***

**GRANT ID NUMBER: HD-50351-08**

**PROJECT TITLE:  
MELVILLE, REVISION, AND COLLABORATIVE EDITING:  
TOWARD A CRITICAL ARCHIVE**

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**GRANTEE INSTITUTION: HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY**

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**By John Bryant, Hofstra University**

Despite Herman Melville's enduring presence in our culture and world literature, no comprehensive electronic archive devoted to Melville has yet been launched. In fact, the standard scholarly print edition of Melville—now fifty years in the making—has yet to be completed. But digitizing Melville's work simply to give this writer reliable representation online or to emulate print editions is an inadequate justification for our projected Melville Electronic Library (MEL).

Our overall goal is to create for Melville a “critical archive” that will not only store a full range of digitized primary and secondary texts related to Melville's life, works, and creative process but also provide various “workspaces” where users can interact, collaborate, and generate new scholarship. At the same time, over the past two decades, scholarship in heretofore unfamiliar resources has given us a better understanding of a variety of “new Melvilles” and new ways to read Melville. For instance, the heavily revised *Typee* manuscript (or any of Melville's many working-draft manuscripts, in particular *Billy Budd*) reveals the writer to be a relentless reviser. Annotated volumes from Melville's library (dispersed at his death but resurfacing book by book in rare book markets each year) indicate a voracious reader studying to be a poet. And Melville's recently catalogued print collection discloses him to be an avid collector of fine art. Since the 1990s, Melville has become a cultural icon, and his works have inspired countless adaptations, performances, plays, films, artworks, and musical productions, including a recent, highly acclaimed operatic version of *Moby-Dick*. And yet because these new “versions of Melville” are inaccessible to most students, critics, and scholars, they are likely to remain hidden. A “critical archive” like MEL would give users unprecedented access to digital versions of these new materials, texts, and adaptations; and thereby broaden and deepen our knowledge of one of America's greatest writers.

From the start, our conception of MEL has been ambitious. It should be something of an online research center that gives users access not only to searchable primary texts that meet TEI standards but also to manuscripts, source works, marginalia, a gallery of Melville's print collection, as well as biographical materials, a bibliography of and selections from the secondary critical response to Melville, and adaptations of Melville works. And yet MEL should also be an intellectual playground wherein users can pull texts and images together to create critical essays and presentations, to interact with others on building upon and adding to the works already edited, and to play games with texts that take us deeper into Melville and Melville's world.

Our Level I NEH Digital Start-Up grant (HD5035108)—designated a “We the People” project—has played a crucial role in kick-starting MEL. It has allowed Melville and digital scholars to gather at Hofstra University to plan the critical archive's intellectual content. It has facilitated the technological development of TexLab at Hofstra, an innovative program for transcribing manuscripts and establishing the archive's textual database. And it has stimulated Hofstra's Faculty Computing Services and Library to pursue a high-level digital humanities project. In this regard, the grant allowed me to develop the kinds of administrative skills necessary for working together with different

segments of my University. Not least of its accomplishments, the grant enabled me to write a successful NEH Scholarly Editions grant for developing MEL in earnest.

### Digital Editing

A central goal in our Start-Up grant was to develop a proof-of-concept for TextLab, a program for tracking and editing Melville's revision process evident in his working draft manuscripts. The idea is that such a tool would facilitate the reading of manuscripts, instruct users in the critical thinking involved in such reading, broaden the participation of critics in this area of expertise, and essentially bring manuscript and revision analysis out of the rare book room and into the mainstream of literary and cultural studies. Online digital programming is ideally suited for promoting these intellectual and collaborative goals.

Already, John Bryant had launched *Herman Melville's Typee: A Fluid-Text Edition* (U Virginia P, Rotunda)—since awarded MLA's scholarly edition seal—which uses Bryant's protocols for the editing of texts that exist in multiple versions (discussed in *The Fluid Text*) to provide revision sequences and revision narratives for over 1100 revision sites in Melville's working draft manuscript of his first novel *Typee* (further discussed in *Melville Unfolding*). But while the online *Typee* site is digital in the sense that it supplies hyperlinks between a base version of the *Typee* text and its numerous revision sequences and narratives, it does not link these elements to the manuscript images or the diplomatic transcription of these images. Moreover, the scholarship for the site is fixed, and users may not interact with it or the primary materials in order to offer alternative readings of the revision sites, sequences, and narratives.

But why would editors of a scholarly edition permit or even want reader interaction with the edition itself? Certainly, it would seem that if editing is a precise art used to generate so-called "definitive" texts, no one would want to empower readers to modify an edition that has been created through years of reliable scholarship. Indeed, the interactive and collaborative potential of online archives poses a challenge to scholarly editors who might want to see their labors remain inviolable. And there is substance to this concern: no one wishes to see good textual scholarship undermined or compromised by irresponsible digital intervention.

And yet, all editing is a critical act subject to discourse and change. Editors examine textual print variants—or, as in the case of working draft manuscripts, they identify the series of wordings that make up a revision—and they rely upon their judgment and critical skills to justify (that is, argue for) their decisions as to what words were intended and in what sequence. Such scholarship is inherently hypothetical, and therefore requires the company of competing hypotheses. Textual editing, then, is an interpretive act, and the editing of any writer necessarily evolves as new editions emerge. New teams of editors re-conceive the texts they edit, and will naturally "re-edit" and "un-edit" literary works for new generations. In general, editing is best performed with groups of readers reflecting together and arguing over textual problems, and in fact, new readers will also find textual problems not previously addressed or even imagined. As a form of critical

discourse, textual scholarship only grows in reliability to the degree that it invites broader participation.

A digital “critical archive,” like MEL, has the capacity to encourage new team membership in its ongoing editorial enterprise and to perpetuate its editorial office over generations. And as a tool for the collaborative editing of texts in revision, TextLab facilitates editorial interaction and the measured tracking of inevitable “re-editing.”

#### TextLab

Given the critical and evolutionary nature of editing, digital editing should not be seen as a threat to editorial authority but rather a means of realizing and facilitating the inherently interpretive and collaborative nature of any editorial project. One way to achieve responsible scholarly editing in a digital realm is to create tools that will facilitate interaction and collaboration while insuring high standards.

Our Digital Humanities grant funded the start-up of an open-source software program, called TextLab, that would provide an interactive environment for collaborative fluid-text editing. In it, users would be able to download images of manuscripts and print texts, mark the revision sites directly on each image, transcribe the texts and sites in TEI XML, link the sites to the transcription, and then link image, sites, and transcription to corresponding revision sequences and narratives. In addition, TextLab will contain the textual data enabling a user to create critical editions of fluid texts or to conduct pedagogical workshops for the study of manuscripts and print texts in revision. Users can build new revision sites, sequences, and narratives; or they can provide alternative sequences and narratives to existing revision sites. Multiple revision sequences and narratives for single revision sites would be stored together as the basis for continued discussion about the different interpretations of the revision process.

The idea is for TextLab to become a model for manuscript and revision transcription as well as collaborative editing that would be readily adapted to the works of any author, not just Melville. But an added benefit of basing the building of TextLab on Melville is that we can bring to light Melville’s manuscripts, which heretofore have been kept in library vaults. In short, the development of TextLab will not only facilitate our understanding of a “new Melville” known only through his revision process but also enhance the study of complex, working-draft manuscripts in general. The principal concern of our Start-Up grant was whether such a thing as TextLab could exist.

#### MEL Organization

A second goal for the grant was to begin organizing the Melville Electronic Library that would contain the site’s “textual core” and workspaces, such as TextLab, for manipulating text and images. Creating a large and ambitious site such as MEL cannot be achieved, I feel, by one person thinking and acting alone. A “critical archive” is not a digital publication composed by one person only; the archive is a community and an institution. In order to build MEL, I needed the participation of numerous scholars (both digital and Melvillean), critics, and pedagogues, each with different angles of vision and insight, to shape the site’s content and to envision tools (other than TextLab) for

performing new kinds of Melville scholarship. At the same time, I had hoped that the Digital Start-Up grant would lead to larger grants for creating MEL. Thus, along with support for developing a proof-of-concept for TextLab, I asked NEH for funding to sponsor “MELCamp,” a gathering of twenty Melville scholars at Hofstra University to discuss the shaping of MEL, which would in turn enable me to write a more informed proposal for an NEH Scholarly Editions grant.

#### Outcomes

In my estimation, the Digital Humanities Start-Up grant achieved all that was proposed, and more, but not without the kinds of rethinking of approach one anticipates in an exploratory project such as this.

In pursuing the proof-of-concept for TextLab, my technical team in Hofstra’s Faculty Computing Services division originally explored a variety of software approaches, including Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) and Subversion (SVN), as ways of linking text and image and of storing multiple versions of a revision sequence and narrative. While SVG works well with TEI XML, it is not yet supported by Internet Explorer (IE) and other browsers, and we decided to use a Wiki instead of SVN for collaborative interactions. At present, TextLab is written in JavaScript, with Flash used for making bounding boxes. Our database is MySQL. We anticipate that IE will eventually support SVN, and we look forward to modifying TextLab to include SVN.

At the mid-grant period, our first consulting programmer was able to confirm the proof-of-concept for TextLab. Utilizing Hofstra’s Faculty Computing Service (FCS) and IT staff, we began building a prototype. At the same time, Hofstra supplemented NEH travel funds to enable me and an FCS programmer to attend a week-long digital workshop, at Miami University (Ohio), to develop our TEI skills. Similar collaborative funding allowed me to attend an advanced workshop on TEI mark-up for manuscripts at MITH (University of Maryland) in January, 2010.

In the latter half of the grant period, I devised a two-stage strategy for the digital editing of revision, involving what I call primary and secondary editing. In the first stage, the TextLab editor uses a drawing tool to put bounding boxes around each perceived bit of “revision data” on a given digital image of a manuscript page. Once the box is drawn, the program asks the editor to identify the revision as an addition or deletion. Once that is done, the coordinates for the bounding box appear in a TEI text editor box to the side, and the editor is then able to transcribe the text of the revision data within the bounding box, as well as the surrounding unrevised texts. These chunks of text—which together account for the textual totality of the manuscript—is then stored in a MySQL database.

In secondary editing—a form of “stand-off” mark-up—the editor returns to TextLab, pulls up a manuscript image page with its various “boxes” of revision data already coded. The secondary editor then clicks a marked revision box or set of boxes visible on the image page in order to designate what the editor perceives to be a “revision site,” that is, a locus encompassing one or more related acts of revision. TextLab assigns a unique code to the selected revision site and displays the revision data from the selected boxes in

a TEI text editor in frame off to the side. The editor can then inscribe (in TEI XML) a “revision sequence,” with each step in the sequence automatically numbered in the order of the revision steps that the editor gives to the available revision data. In addition, the editor will be prompted to supply a “revision narrative” that tells what revisions occurred at each step of the selected revision site, with links to each numbered step in the sequence.

With an extension of the grant time period from October 2009 to February 2010, we were able to witness the development of the first phase of TextLab, that is, its primary editing feature. The grant also included funding for the testing of TextLab. Five scholars were given access to our most recent version (TextLab0.8) and asked to respond to a series of questions based on their use of the tool in transcribing the digital image of a leaf from *Billy Budd* (supplied by Harvard’s Houghton Library). Their feedback has been collected, and we will continue (in our present NEH Scholarly Editions grant) to develop fixes.

On October 24, 2008, twenty scholars gathered at Hofstra University for our first MELCamp. Our objectives in this full day’s worth of group and plenary sessions were to demonstrate TextLab, discuss the shaping of MEL’s content, and establish commitments from scholars to make further contributions of ideas and labor in making MEL a reality. We decided to continue building MEL’s “textual core” by focusing on three key Melville texts: *Moby-Dick*, *Battle-Pieces*, and *Billy Budd*.

*Moby-Dick* is an obvious content choice, but since it exists in radically different British and American versions, it is also an important fluid text for our editorial approach. Rather than mounting only one text of *Moby-Dick*, MEL will be able to provide multiple versions (including the modern scholarly editions, which also vary from both originals); and we plan to develop a way for users to navigate the British expurgations of *Moby-Dick*. *Battle-Pieces*, Melville’s volume of Civil War poems, is a logical focal text because its poetic lines allow us to study TEI’s mark-up for poetry, and because its subject matter will intersect nicely with the Melville Society’s projected International Conference on Melville, Whitman, and the Civil War, in 2013 (a sesquicentennial year for the war). Finally, *Billy Budd* exists as a complete manuscript that mixes over 350 fair copy and working draft leaves. The novella also exists as three modern transcriptions (each different). We will be using digital images of the *Billy Budd* manuscript, supplied by Harvard’s Houghton Library in developing TextLab. At MELCamp 2008, participants signed up in one of four study groups: one for each of the three focal texts and Textlab.

#### Additional Outcomes

In the wake of MELCamp, I was well-armed with technical and collegial input for writing up what proved to be a successful proposal of our NEH Scholarly Editions grant for 2009-2011. Just as the MEL’s Start-Up Grant of 2008 was Hofstra’s first digital humanities grant, the Scholarly Editions grant (awarded for two years at a total of \$175,000) was the largest humanities grant in Hofstra’s history. Both grants have helped

bring the English department and Faculty Computing closer together, and they have given us an opportunity to realize latent interests in both groups: a digital Melville site has been a dream of mine since 1997 and Hofstra's programmers have been starved for scholarly humanities projects in recent years. I have been able to start a dialog with the Dean of Hofstra's Library and certain interested librarians in the creation of a text-capturing laboratory and in the problems of metadata. At the same time, Hofstra's Provost and the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences have shown their support by helping to fund food and travel for MELCamp participants. They helped cover expenses for me and an assistant programmer to attend the week-long TEI digital workshop at Miami University in Ohio. It is not likely that any of this administrative support would have been justifiable without the NEH Start-Up grant in place.

In addition, the new Scholarly Editions grant, riding the coattails of the Start-Up, has in turn stimulated interest beyond Hofstra. Our second MELCamp, which met on April 23, 2010, included two younger scholars interested in both digital and Melville research. We hope the word will grow, and that we can attract more people to the MEL community of scholars, technicians, librarians, and programmers.

#### Learning Experiences

I can say without qualification that my Digital Humanities Start-Up grant was a god-send. I have wanted to put Melville online since the late 1990s, but was turned down twice (1999 and 2000) for a collaborative research grant to do precisely the kind of planning, research, and development we were able to do with the Start-up. It has provided precisely the kind of focus and granting structure I needed to get going. And the Scholarly Editions award, which I hope will continue in future grant cycles, is proof, I think, of the Start-Up's effectiveness.

While I have administered two NEH Summer Seminars in the past (1993 and 1995), and garnered administrative experience in managing both of those six-week programs, I learned much more administratively during the Start-Up grant period than I had expected. I found myself scheduling events, conferring regularly with Hofstra's Faculty Computing Services, discussing important technical matters at a level most humanities faculty would find intimidating, working on links with the library, its dean, and staff, delegating responsibilities to other Melville scholars, and filling out budget forms for compensation. I have also benefited from forging good relationships with administrators in Hofstra's IT division, Faculty Computing, and Grants, and Accounting.

With any digital project, ideas come quickly, and die quickly. I am grateful for colleagues who are patient with my changes of mind, and grateful too that I have some capacity for understanding why their changes of mind have to be. Not surprisingly one learns to be flexible and to learn to listen as well as develop new ways to articulate ideas more clearly. I have been lucky that my colleagues at Hofstra have been good listeners and teachers. One exception did occur. Early in the project, I found myself struggling to make my ideas clear to one programmer, who seemed more interested in quick results and quick fixes than comprehending the overall picture of the complicated textual world TextLab had to inhabit. The individual was resistant to TEI and wanted to show that only



a database approach would work. Others agreed that a new staff programmer was needed, and with plenty of time to spare, we got the project back on track, and in fact ahead of schedule (as completion of TextLab, Stage 1, went well beyond the project's goal of simply working out a proof-of-concept). My point here is that I learned some of the human (not to mention technical) complexities involved with programming and programmers.

It goes without saying that to administer a project that blends intellectual and technical worlds, one must inhabit both spheres. You cannot run a program without knowing how the nuts and bolts fit together. And the Start-Up grant gave me the opportunity to see this theoretical truism as a practical truth as well. This is not to say that I feel I must acquire a thorough training as a programmer. However, I recognize the need to learn more about programming and mark-up and have profited greatly from the two previously mentioned TEI workshops. I believe the Start-Up grant has also given me a professional boost. I was asked to share my ideas about editing fluid texts in manuscript at MIT's Center for Media Studies and at a program in Paris sponsored by TEI's Manuscript-SIG, both in Spring, 2009. I have also been asked to lead a workshop on adaptation in Copenhagen next December. Two publications, written during the grant period and featuring TextLab and the notion of Critical Archive, will appear in the fall of 2010: "Re-Writing *Moby-Dick*" (PMLA) and "Where is the Text of America" (in *American Literary Scholarship in the Digital Age*, Michigan UP).

While I have a good deal to learn still, I feel more in touch with the problems related to digital mark-up. At the same time, I make a point of talking with IT administrators and programmers about the intricacies of their operations, from server space to database. I fear (and hope) I will be pestering these patient and resilient experts for some years to come.