

# Adaptation Studies

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# 3

## Textual identity and adaptive revision: Editing adaptation as a fluid text

*John Bryant*

Until recently, our profession has taken adaptation to be sub-literary, at best merely tangential to the project of interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Adaptation is creativity's stepchild, always vying for validation, never catching up to its originating source. But this view depends upon an exclusionary and inadequate notion of the written 'work' and the writing process in general. The assumption for geneticists who focus solely on the originating writers is that writing is confined strictly to the texts associated with the creation of the originating *work*. But if adaptation is to achieve its proper textual legitimacy, we need a broader conception of geneticism in which the notion of *work* embraces all versions of a text, including sources and adaptations, and the *creative process* is extended to include all forms of revision, both authorial and cultural.

In the fluid-text approach I propose here, a *work* is the sum of its versions; *creativity* extends beyond the solitary writer, and *writing* is a cultural event transcending media. That is, if we see the writing process as progressing beyond the originating author's work, stretching back in time to sources that precede the work and

forward from the moment of publication across genres and media; and if we see creativity as both an individual and social process involving moments of solitary inspiration but also collaboration with readers; then we can conceive of a ‘version’ of geneticism at its fullest, one that embraces the social text in its broadest material incarnations, and in particular texts in revision, or what I call the *fluid text*.<sup>2</sup> A fluid text is any work that exists in multiple versions in which the primary cause of those versions is some form of revision. Revisions may be performed by originating writers, by their editors and publishers, or by readers and audiences, who reshape the originating work to reflect their own desires for the text, themselves, their culture.

This third category, which I have elsewhere tentatively called ‘cultural revision’, is the proper arena of *adaptation*.<sup>3</sup> As revising readers, adaptors of the originating version of a work are collaborators in the making of the *work* in its totality. Like translators, they transform a text for new or different audiences, and address new conditions and problems in a culture. Herman Melville is surely the author of *Moby-Dick* (1851), but adaptors generate new versions of the text and thereby re-author the work, giving it new meaning in new contexts, and in some degree drawing out in sharper delineations the originating author’s original intentions. My focus here is to explore the ways in which the study of versions and of adaptation and what I call ‘adaptive revision’ intersect textually, critically, ethically and editorially.

I would like to begin by making a few important distinctions. The ideas and terms involved can be laid out in the following argument:

- Adaptation is an **announced retelling** of an originating text.
- Announced adaptations are distinct from but related to **adaptive revision**, in which an originating writer or adaptor appropriates a borrowed text and, by ‘quoting’ it, essentially revises it and therefore adapts it, though in an intertextual and necessarily partial rather than comprehensive way.
- Both announced adaptation and adaptive revision are **versions** of the originating or borrowed text.

- The meaning of any adaptation is essentially a measuring of the **critical distances between and among adaptive versions**.
- Interpretation is the analysis of the **strategies of revision** perceived in the making of these textual distances.
- While versions are necessarily interconnected, they possess distinct **textual identities**. The *ethics* of adaptation is knowing and acknowledging **the boundaries of textual identity**.
- Editing adaptation and adaptive revision is best achieved through **digital** and **fluid text** approaches.

I have bulleted these definitions knowing that in the space allotted I cannot argue for them fully. Even so, by putting them on the table, I want to gesture toward the scope and depth of adaptation, and not only the validity, but also the necessity of adaptation studies in the analysis of texts, writing and culture. My principal example is *Moby-Dick* – or rather, I should say, the cultural phenomenon or adapted works associated with this book – as it relates to the matter of creation, interpretation and ‘adaptive revision’.

It goes without saying that *adaptation* is an act of interpretation.<sup>4</sup> But to suggest that the adaptor is in some way extending a work or collaborating with the originating author might seem a stretch, especially if we hold authorial intentions to be sacrosanct. We like to place a wall between originating work and its adaptation when it comes to defining textually the *work*. I would like to breach that wall, but not tear it down. The breaching begins when we contemplate the symbiosis of writing and reading. Publishing writers write for readers, and they write in order to be read. Indeed, a text does not truly exist until a reader – even if that reader is ‘only’ an editor – converts the written words into the mental thoughts those words convey. The act of reading also involves a reader response, which is as sacrosanct as the writer’s intentions during isolated acts of composition. Moreover, willful readers notoriously ignore authorial intentions and read or interpret as they wish. Our (mis)reading is an inalienable right. Indeed, we critics make our living by it. Given the very nature of reading and writing, we are hard pressed to insist upon an insurmountable wall dividing originating and adaptive texts.

But adaptation takes us into a specialized arena in which reading and interpretation are themselves embodied in a revision of the originating text. Adaptors are 'revising readers' who enact their interpretations, not through criticism, but by altering the material text itself through quotation, allusion and plagiarism, in what might be called 'partial adaptation' or 'adaptive revision', and in larger more comprehensive projects through announced adaptation. Adaptation is both a transgression of the originating work and a liberation. And like any form of liberation, the adaptor's sense of empowerment can infuriate or delight.

Until fairly recently, adaptation has been taken as a form of textual corruption, and, in fact, a principal impetus for much of modern scholarly editing has been to preserve the textual identity of a given originating work, and that originating work only. Post-authorial versions of a work are typically left out of a scholarly edition for the obvious reason that such adaptations are generally not performed, sanctioned or even witnessed by the originating writer; they have a different textual identity altogether. Different, of course, but not unrelated; and, in fact, the existence of the adaptations of a work helps to establish the post-publication and posthumous reception or 'life' of a work as it continues to be consumed well after the moment of its inception. The delight that a culture takes in revising works by Shakespeare or Melville, let's say, speaks directly to that culture's own evolving identity. Readers show their love of a work by changing it, remaking it, retelling it, adapting it. Indeed, a readership's obsessive revisions of a work insures that work's continued life and, ironically, inspires scholars to study, teach and edit those revered originating works. It would seem only natural, then, for scholarly editions to include rather than exclude adaptation as part of its analysis of the text of the *work*, broadly conceived.

Nevertheless, the exclusion of adaptation from editorial projects seems justified for the sake of establishing and preserving the distinct boundaries of an originating work's textual identity. At the heart of such preservationist editorial projects – and let me be clear that all editing is inherently preservationist whether the editorial object is an originating or adaptive text – is the anxiety that readers and the culture will forget the original text, its wording and the biographical condition of its genesis. Adaptation is taken, then, not so much as a corruption but as the threat of amnesia, a

forgetting of the original. However, and interestingly enough, the act of adaptation necessarily requires some awareness of or relation to origination, and that link alone should justify the inclusion of the editing of adaptations and adaptive revision in what might be called the 'normative' scholarly editions of 'great works'. But to expand scholarly editing in this way suggests a shift of focus. Rather than retrieving and preserving the author's 'intended text' of a work as a textual object, fluid text editing attempts to trace the phenomenon of textual evolution by focusing on the text as a dynamic process that charts the changing textual identities of originating version, authorial revisions and adaptive revisions.

As we know, adaptations have been too often judged by the yardstick of fidelity to their originals and too readily disposed as pale imitations or wretched bowdlerizations, driven by mass marketing. But the causes of imitation, censorship and markets are themselves worthy of study, and adaptation gives us direct access to these aesthetic and social phenomena. This critical focus is enough to warrant new, largely digital approaches to the editing of original and adaptive texts in tandem. But adaptation need not be exclusively derivative; it has its own genius and reason for being. Furthermore, we can see originating authors engaged themselves in isolated acts of adaptation. Particularly compelling is the degree to which a focus on particular announced adaptations as discrete but interconnected projects encourages us also to recognize and validate the adaptive nature of intertextual behaviours operating within originating works.<sup>5</sup> I see this kind of 'adaptive revision' happening, for instance, in Melville's contemplation of Shakespeare and in Edward Said's problematic (mis)reading of *Moby-Dick*. And these phenomena, in turn, urge us even more toward a fluid text approach to the editing of adaptation.

### *Moby-Dick* and adaptive revision

As a reader of Shakespeare, Melville sensed not only Shakespeare's greatness but also Shakespeare's inability fully to enact his intentions, or what Melville interpreted Shakespeare's intentions to be. In an 1849 letter to his editor Evert Duyckinck, Melville wishes that Shakespeare 'had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway.'



He argues that in his own Elizabethan day, Shakespeare was forced to wear a ‘muzzle ... on [his soul].’ ‘I hold it a verity,’ he wrote, “that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who, in this intolerant Universe is, or can be?’ But, he concludes, ‘the Declaration of Independence makes a difference.’<sup>6</sup> That is, in democratic America and free from courtly censors, Shakespeare would have written more freely, more directly, more dangerously.

A year later, in his review of Hawthorne, Melville claimed that American writers were poised to match, even out-do ‘Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth.’ ‘Shakespeares,’ he insisted, ‘are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio.’<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, I argue that in over-dramatizing Ahab, Melville was attempting to out-Shakespeare Shakespeare and purge himself of bardolatry.<sup>8</sup> But here, let me add that Melville was also paying homage to Shakespeare by revising, extending – in fact fulfilling – Shakespeare. Melville was acting out the rights of expression denied to Shakespeare but granted, by the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, to Melville.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville was removing the Elizabethan muzzle that Shakespeare had to wear, so that Ahab could speak truths that Shakespeare only thought but dared not speak. Thus, Hamlet is frozen by the question of Being and Nothingness. For Hamlet ‘the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns, puzzles the will’ (*Hamlet* 3.1.77–9). But for Ahab in a thunderstorm at sea, defiance is our ‘right worship’, and he makes no question of his will to be: ‘In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here... . [T]he queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights.’<sup>9</sup> Defiant Ahab is not ‘puzzled’; he does not hide his superior intellect from the queenly Elizabeth; he becomes Elizabeth, with all her rights of imperial self-expression.

Surely, fatherless Ahab is, in part, Melville’s rewriting of the father-vexed Hamlet, but this kind of rewriting both is and is not adaptation. Let’s explore how Melville’s version of Shakespeare may and may not be an adaptation to help grasp the limits of adaptation as a critical and creative phenomenon.

We can pretty much dismiss the idea that in writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville was attempting an adaptation, or ‘announced retelling’ of Shakespeare. While the text echoes Hamlet, Lear and Macbeth,

the novel does not retell those tales, and its borrowings from Shakespeare are no more prominent than the novel's reliance on the Bible or Milton. *Moby-Dick* mixes homage, echo, allusion, quotation, paraphrase and even plagiarism in a kind of intertextual weaving that is evident in any highly imbricated modern work. But no one would argue that these layerings constitute an 'announced adaptation'. Even so, Melville's text enacts the liberating function of what I mean by 'adaptive revision'. Ahab's defiant soliloquy set in a tempest takes certain liberties of thought not allowed by Elizabeth in Hamlet's less determined soliloquy. Whereas Shakespeare takes death as sleep and dream and then as a puzzlement of the will, Melville figures human consciousness – the fact of its very existence – as a defiance of death. In a sense, Melville's adaptive revision enables Shakespeare to engage more fully in the 'great Art of Telling the Truth.'

Although not an announced adaptation, Melville's version of Shakespeare embedded in *Moby-Dick* supplies us with an epitome of adaptation in general. Melville adopted Shakespeare's voice for Ahab, and like an adaptor, he blended that performed voice with his own voice thereby giving Shakespeare a new presence. An informed, transatlantic reader cannot fail to 'hear' Shakespeare in *Moby-Dick* as it is inflected and transformed through Melville's voice. And yet, Melville's adaptive revision of Shakespeare is an implicit critique of Shakespeare, which, as we have seen, holds the Elizabethan stage in light of American democracy, and both eras in the light of what Ishmael calls the 'ungraspable phantom of life.' To be or not to be? You bet that's the question, but for Melville channelling and revising Shakespeare, that question is not a question but an assertion of will: an emphatic I AM struggling to survive in a republic, at sea, and in confrontation with nothingness and 'the naught beyond.' Melville's adaptive revision frees Shakespeare to speak what previously was unspoken or even unspeakable.

I would like to seize upon this liberationist potential as a springboard to a fluid-text approach to adaptation. What I am calling Melville's adaptive revision of Shakespeare is also Melville's version of Shakespeare, not at all a retelling of Hamlet but a re-writing and a mingling of two 'textual identities', Melville and Shakespeare. Shortly, I want to explore how others have rewritten Melville as well so that, going forward in the broader creative collaborative

process, today's adaptors have incorporated Melville's textual identity into their own, perhaps with a congruent agenda of freeing Melville to engage 'the great Art of Telling the Truth.' But for the moment, let's continue to inspect the larger theoretical field of textual fluidity, including its textual, critical, editorial and ethical dimensions.

## Adaptation and ethics

Textually speaking, and as noted before, a written *work* (as textual object) is the sum of its versions. It is the collocation of texts derived from various activities: the borrowing from sources, revisions found in manuscript, in the tinkering in proofs, in the expurgations of subsequent editions, and the like. The announced retellings of adaptation (and translation as well) are interpretive creations, which, as readers' revisions, are homologous versions that find shelter under the ever-lifting umbrella of the further *workings* associated with an originating text. From a fluid-text perspective, adaptation extends the textual field of creativity and hence interpretation.

Critically speaking, the focus of fluid text analysis cannot be on single versions, but rather on how to measure the critical distances between versions and on what is the meaning inherent in that distancing. But the frequently heard question of whether an adaptation is 'true to its original' or whether it preserves the integrity of the original misconstrues the problem of distance. The anxiety that adaptation cheapens the original stems from a kind of 'textual narcissism' in which we not only assume that the goal of adaptation is to reproduce the original 'faithfully', but also presume that it never can be. In fact, adaptation has the entirely different agenda of revising the original, for whatever social or aesthetic end, through a re-performance or re-writing of it, in order to reposition the originating text in a new cultural context.

This textual narcissism I speak of is itself a fantasy of retrospection that is, interestingly enough, contingent upon the very existence of adaptation. Consider how the nature of an 'original' changes in retrospect once it has become adapted. When *Moby-Dick* first appeared, no reader would have thought at the time to remark how close the novel comes to the 'original' of itself; such a comment

would be logically absurd. Similarly, the anxiety over the fidelity of an original is absurd because it is a phantom that exists not in the original but only after the original has been adapted. Only when we read *Moby-Dick* in the context of subsequent versions of it do we begin to worry about being faithful to the original. But this worry is a false concern because the original version of *Moby-Dick* has not been altered by the revisionary adaptations of it; its newly achieved status as 'the original' remains intact. Put differently, the integrity of the original exists only in the concrete and material particulars – the words on the first edition page or its variants in subsequent authorized editions – that constitute the textual identity of the originating version. A fluid text approach detaches itself from the retrospective anxieties that derive from a false sense of originality and respects the textual identities of both adaptation and original, but does so primarily to sharpen the focus on the differences between the identities and how one textual identity may be seen to evolve into the other.

In this regard, ethics follows aesthetics. Adaptation is not only inevitable; it is a form of retelling that is so inherently irresistible to human beings that it is an inalienable right. It is a remix; it is a mash-up. In this regard, adaptation may be seen as an epitome of multicultural democracy with its inescapable anxieties over the evolution of one's ethnicity, the threat of assimilation, the forging of a new identity and the retention or forgetting of past identities. Texts evolve through adaptation just as people adapt and evolve between and within cultures. We cannot know how textual identities evolve – or, in the case of adaptive revision, how they are mixed – until we can identify those identities. Editing is the process by which we gather, define, sort, search, sequentialize and narrativize textual identities, just as we might lay out our ancestors in a genealogical 'family tree' and tell the story of how these separate identities grew, merged and evolved.

How, then, might we edit adaptation? The challenge here, as with editing any fluid text, is to maximize access to all versions for all people, to clarify the boundaries between textual identities so that the mixing of versions can be perceived, and to facilitate the reader's navigation from version to version. Editing is a critical enactment of ethics, for its goal is to make us as aware of the boundaries that define textual identities as we are of the boundaries of our own evolving identity.

Just as Melville rewrote Shakespeare, so have we rewritten Melville. And just as the distances we find in Melville's revising of Shakespeare have meaning, so, too, are contemporary rewritings of *Moby-Dick* a reflection of our need to adapt Melville's vision into ours, with, of course, critical and perhaps unintended consequences. To explore these complexities, I draw upon an intriguing textual episode related in my essay entitled 'Rewriting *Moby-Dick*', a part of which I quote below, altering it slightly from its original in order to adapt it in this volume for those focused on adaptation studies.<sup>10</sup>

## Rewriting *Moby-Dick*

Less than a week after the attacks of 9/11, critic Edward Said condemned the 'senseless destruction' based on the misguided 'religious and political abstractions and reductive myths' of terrorists.<sup>11</sup> He appealed for more 'sense' and less 'claptrap' in exposing 'the roots of terror in injustice' so that 'terrorists [may be] isolated, deterred or put out of business.' But, Said argued, the media's conversion of Osama bin Laden into a cartoon villain falsely prioritizes the agents of destruction over the imperialism that incites them.

Said then made the following comparison: 'collective passions are being funneled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick.' The prophetic implication was that the Bush administration had become derailed by its benighted anger over this affront to its 'imperial power'.

In a subsequent interview, Said clarified his reference to Melville. Ahab, he explained, will pursue Moby Dick 'to the ends of the Earth'; his mission is 'suicidal'.<sup>12</sup> Bush, he continued, has a similarly 'apocalyptic' vision: he has made bin Laden into 'a symbol of all that's evil', and like Moby Dick, he will be falsely viewed as something 'mythological', and the justification for retaliatory violence that will make us as demonic as our false image of bin Laden. To crystallize his argument, Said describes Ahab's death: 'In the final scene of the novel, Captain Ahab is being borne out to sea, wrapped around the white whale with the rope of his own harpoon and going obviously to his death. It was a scene of almost suicidal finality.' The powerful image underscores Said's point

that America's obsession to kill a terrorist rather than understand terrorism is America's undoing: like Ahab we are tangled to a beast of our own creation.

But in fact, the 'final scene' Said recounts is not in *Moby-Dick*. In Melville's version, Ahab's departure is far less dramatic. Ahab harpoons Moby Dick, and as the white whale races off, the line attached to him whizzes out of the tub in Ahab's whaleboat. A kink in the line creates a flying loop that seizes Ahab by the neck, garottes him and zips him into the sea. He simply disappears: swiftly, silently, anticlimactically. Ahab's demise occurs so quickly that readers can miss it. Given Melville's effort to stage Ahab as if he were Hamlet, Macbeth or Lear, we expect more sound and fury; but in Melville's version of *Moby-Dick*, Ahab is gone before we know it.

In the originating novel, Ahab is killed not by a whale but a whale line, and Melville prepares us for this fact in earlier chapters that explain the physical and metaphorical 'lines' that shape the conditions of whaling and the fates of whaling men. Consider the meaning of rope. In 'The Line' (Ch. 61), Ishmael explains its destructive properties. If not properly coiled in its tub, the whale line can snatch you and take you down. Moreover, Melville weaves strands of oriental imagery into his descriptions of whale lines. The prophetic Parsee, Fedallah, declares that only hemp can destroy Ahab; only hemp, and hemp alone, the fabric of whale lines, which in 'The Line', Ishmael calls 'a dusky, dark fellow, a sort of Indian.' Furthermore, in Ahab's demise, the line takes Ahab out 'voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim.' Thus, in Melville's death scene, Ahab is not entangled by lines on the symbolic whale, as Said relates it. Instead, he is strangled by a symbolic, orientalized line linked to Fedallah, the orientalized emblem of Ahab's fate.

Of course, rope is integral to Said's rewriting of Ahab's demise: Said sees Ahab 'wrapped around the white whale with the rope of his own harpoon', so that the impression of Ahab's (and America's) fatal obsession with the terroristic whale is associated with a rope of his own undoing, much like the ironic death by hemp that Fedallah prophesies for Ahab. But Said adaptively revises this image of entanglement not from Melville's novel but from the powerful conclusion of John Huston's 1956 film version. In this announced adaptation, Ahab, played by Gregory Peck, harpoons Moby Dick, falls into the sea and climbs on to the back of the whale, which is

wrapped in whale lines. The whale submerges with Ahab stabbing away, and when it surfaces, the drowned Ahab is tangled in the harpoon lines as if crucified. The rocking of the cinematic whale imparts movement to Ahab's lifeless arm, which beckons the crew to their cinematic annihilation.

This rendition of Ahab's death is powerful cinema, but it was not entirely invented for the film. It comes from another scene in *Moby-Dick*. In adapting Melville's novel, screenwriter Ray Bradbury had triumphantly reported to Huston that he had given the 'heave' to Fedallah, cutting him entirely from the film. And his decision to eradicate Fedallah and the dense imbrication of orientalist allusion that he represents, constitutes by itself a politically significant revision strategy. A version of *Moby-Dick* without Fedallah poses a significant critical distance between novel and film. As for the revision of Ahab's death scene, Bradbury claims, 'That's my addition; that's not Melville. I eliminated Fedallah and allowed Moby Dick to come into direct contact with Ahab.'<sup>13</sup> But, in fact, Bradbury's version of Ahab's demise – the version Said recalls – is not the 'addition' he claims it is. Bradbury cribbed it from Melville. Having given Fedallah the 'heave', Bradbury nevertheless assigned to Ahab a version of the death scene that Melville had given to Fedallah.

In 'The Chase – Second Day' (Ch. 134), the Parsee is reported missing at sea. However, on the third day, the dead Fedallah returns: 'Lashed round and round to the fish's back; pinioned in the turns upon turns in which, during the past night, the whale had reeled the involutions of the lines around him, the half torn body of the Parsee was seen; ... his distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab.'<sup>14</sup> In rewriting Melville's *Moby-Dick* for the Huston film, Bradbury puts Gregory Peck as Ahab in Fedallah's place and transforms Fedallah's 'distended eyes' staring at Ahab 'into Ahab's lifeless beckoning of the crew.' In the film, the crew respond to the beckoning 'dead arm' and 'pursue the white whale to their doom.' Bradbury's revision also transforms Melville's ineffectual crew stationed on the *Pequod*, who go down with the ship when Moby Dick strikes it, into a rage-enabled crew dispersed in whaleboats destroyed by the whale's repeated pummelings. It is a scene of heroic loyalty, resistance and martyrdom in the face of merciless 'intelligent malignity'.<sup>15</sup>

Bradbury's rewriting of Ahab's death consists of three

'distancings': the elimination of Fedallah, the transference of Fedallah's entanglement in whale lines to Ahab and the transformation of Fedallah's prophetic stare into Ahab's martyred beckoning arm. These strategic revisions of Fedallah have suggestive affinities with Said's linking of Ahab's demise to the terrorist attacks and his own predictions for post-9/11 America. Of course, Said's rewriting of *Moby-Dick* is an adaptive revision, not an announced retelling of the novel, and it might be taken as an honest confusion of a great critic who has otherwise cogently nailed his flag to Melville's mast-head. But in remembering Bradbury's film as Melville's novel, Said has also mixed two versions of *Moby-Dick*, and rendered that conflation of textual identities in print.

For the purposes of transforming a complicated novel into a memorable film, Bradbury's rewriting of *Moby-Dick* is, from the perspective of concision if not politics, remarkably effective. Said's adaptive revision of the film for his own political statement, however, is more complicated. His revision process has two critical consequences: by quoting Bradbury, Said not only validates the textual identity of Bradbury's version but also, through his adaptive revision, makes an application of the adaptation that, by virtue of its being in print, constitutes its own sub-version. And, secondly, by extending the whale-line symbolism to present-day politics, he discloses a cultural necessity in the dynamic of rewriting of *Moby-Dick*. To clarify this dynamic, let's consider Melville's own critique of orientalism.

In *Moby-Dick*, politics and water are wedded. In earlier works, Melville had drawn upon his years at sea as an occasion to critique imperialism, evangelism, American politics, naval authoritarianism, slavery and immigration. However, in writing *Moby-Dick*, he would travel waters he had never actually sailed. Instead of turning west into the familiar Pacific, the *Pequod* turns east into the Indian Ocean, China Sea and waters 'off Japan.' Melville was writing beyond personal experience and depicted the 'Orient' exclusively through written sources, or what Said calls the 'representative figures, or tropes' of 'Orientalist discourse.'<sup>16</sup> In some instances, Melville's rhetoric betrays a Westerner's dependency upon what Said calls the 'clap trap' mysticism of orientalism in its various modalities: Islamic, Persian, Hindu, Chinese and Philippine. But Melville was able to work beyond what Said calls the 'vacillation between the familiar and the alien'<sup>17</sup> that is typical of Western



stereotypes. With Fedallah and Queequeg, Melville attempts to familiarize the alien East, in order to imagine a more diverse West. His use of Fedallah amounts to a controlled deconstruction of the culture's pernicious orientalism.

Although dark-skinned Fedallah commands a lighter-skinned crew of 'Manillas, a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtlety',<sup>18</sup> he is himself a 'Parsee', belonging to an Indian sect of Zoroastrians descended from Persia, yet he has an Arabic name. He wears a turban and yet a Chinese jacket. In effect, Fedallah is a cosmopolitan concatenation of oriental tags: a stereotype and yet a parody of stereotyping. But Melville's more effective deconstruction of orientalism is in Fedallah's role as Ahab's prophetic other self in deconstructing outmoded notions of fate.

Part of Melville's daring in writing *Moby-Dick* was to detach the notion of 'fate' from the gods, linking it instead to ontology. His stated position is to dismiss 'predictions from without' and locate our fate in 'the innermost necessities of our being'.<sup>19</sup> Fate is not supernatural; nor is it 'character'; it is located in an argument regarding consciousness itself reminiscent of Hamlet: To be is to deny hierarchies beyond the self: to be is to defy. But to defy is to die and not be. As an emblem for the fate of being, Fedallah is both familiar and alien. Rather than being the 'clap trap' of orientalism, Fedallah is the Orient's revenge. He redefines human necessity and denial, and serves, too, as an ironic critique of Western stereotyping.

According to Dorothee Finkelstein, Fedallah's name recalls the 'Fedai' or avenging angels, 'a secret order of Islamic mystics pledged to commit murder in the service of Allah'.<sup>20</sup> For centuries and in recent decades, *fedayeen* has been a word in the Islamic world ascribed to terrorists and terrorist organizations. The Fedai were also associated with the eleventh-century 'Assassins', who acted under the influence of hashish, which is derived from hemp, which is the fabric of rope, which is the symbol of Ahab's fate. For Finkelstein, Fedallah is a killer 'sent to "assassinate" Ahab, the heretic, who will be killed by the secret weapon which makes assassination possible – hashish, or hemp – i.e. intoxication beyond the reach of reason'.<sup>21</sup>

Finkelstein's etymology binds Fedallah to the Orient, mysticism, terror, rope and 'fate'. Ahab's hyper-awareness of the inexplicable fact of consciousness and his defiance of God's indifference amounts to the 'fate' of his ontological arrogance, which prevents

him from correctly interpreting Fedallah's prophetic signs. In failing to comprehend Fedallah's riddles as riddles, he exposes the limits of his self-knowledge. And to extend Ahab's fateful ontology politically, Ahab's misreading of Fedallah's prophecies is tantamount to a misreading of the orient. A captain of industry, Ahab cleaves to his 'assassin' Fedallah, careless of the Parsee's complicity in the mutual self-destruction inherent in his ontological and imperialist venture. Ahab and Fedallah – like Christian, Muslim and Jew – have mingled identities; but they die separately, each caught up in Western whale lines made of Eastern hemp.

Given Melville's critique, Bradbury's deletion of Fedallah and yet his transference of Fedallah's death on to Ahab are aesthetic revisions with political ramifications. For anyone measuring the distance between novel and film, the absence of Fedallah constitutes an uncanny presence. In transforming Fedallah's death stare at Ahab into Ahab's crucified pose and beckoning of the crew, Bradbury replaces Fedallah's oriental gaze with Ahab's Christian martyrdom, thus effectively westernizing Melville's critique of orientalism. Bradbury's *Moby Dick* concludes with a scene of futile but heroic resistance to the white whale, an indestructible symbol of all that needs to be destroyed. Released in 1956, in the decade after the revelations of Hitler's genocide and at the height of the Cold War, the film may deny Melville's warning against an Ahabian imperialism that neglects the East, but with Ahab now a martyr in the fight against evil, and with his crew in blind allegiance to mad authority, it is an apt, post-McCarthy warning against the absurdity of demonization, extremism and that blind heroism that leaves the surviving Ishmael (and America) yet 'another orphan'.<sup>22</sup>

But to return to Said's rewriting of *Moby-Dick* and the problem of textual identity: Most would argue that Said has not revised Melville; he has simply paraphrased the ending of Bradbury's *Moby Dick* and misattributed it to Melville's *Moby-Dick*. At worst, Said has made an honest mistake. But let's consider the distancing, inevitability and consequences of that mistake. Paraphrase is a form of adaptive revision because the paraphraser creates a new text out of a source text, and that new text is a materially revised version of the original. Since no act of textual transformation is without interpretation, a paraphrastic version is all the more significant as a form of revision or intra-lingual translation. When properly cited, the identity of a paraphrase is distinguishable from its source. But

Said's unexplained mixing of versions – Bradbury and Melville – ambiguates textual identities. Presumably, the confusion derives from the inevitable slippage between the false memory of a text and its readily inspected material text. Memory (false or true) trumps textuality, and plays fast and loose with our desire to make texts in our own image. Said's apparent memory lapse, then, is emblematic of our own cultural amnesia: we know the text we think we know or want to know, and we forget the variant textual identities of the umbrella work and the differences and distances it covers. Thus, by confusing the boundaries between originating text, announced adaptation and the text of his own paraphrastic adaptive revision, Said's mixing of textual identities perpetuates, despite his own critique of orientalism, Bradbury's erasure of Melville's similar critique of orientalism.

Said's rewriting of *Moby-Dick* is a meaningful textual event. It is an adaptive revision of Melville's text and Bradbury's text into a separable but linked textual identity. But to make Said's version interpretable, we must edit the event, so that its mixture of textual identities can be disambiguated. Thus, in returning to a fluid text approach to adaptation, let me conclude with a final focus on what constitutes a version or adaptation, and on the interdependency of editing and interpretation.

## Adaptation as distance and rhetoric

Earlier, I observed that announced adaptation and adaptive revision are versions. Versions are not by themselves sacrosanct; that is, they are, like the versions that come before them and after, subject to revision. Just as Melville revises Shakespeare during his moment in history, and Bradbury revises *Moby-Dick* for his moment, so, too, does Said remix Melville and Bradbury, creating a revision suited to his. But for a text to exist as an identifiable version of something, it must have boundaries that define its textual identity *vis à vis* the textual identities of other versions. Editors of scholarly editions clarify the walls that distinguish one text from another, but, as I have argued from the beginning, a distinctive feature of cultural evolution is that these textual walls are permeable and often breached through adaptation. The critical question, then, is

what meanings can we make in assessing the relation of adaptive and originating text? And the editorial problem is how to make these versions accessible; how might the editor clarify the boundaries of related textual identities and provide methods of navigating those versions? But editing itself is a critical act because identifying a version means performing the interpretive act of measuring the distance between versions to confirm that the two are indeed versions to begin with. How, then, do the editor and critic measure the meaningful distance between versions?

If written works can be known by their rhetorical strategies, then versions, like any written work, can be similarly defined, with the added understanding that the act of revision, which generates the version, is itself a rhetorical strategy. We know a version, then, not only by its revisions, but also by its revision strategy. A revision strategy may be defined as a set of textual changes designed to have a rhetorical effect that is meaningfully distinct, or distant, from its original. Indeed, I would say that if a revised text reveals to us no revision strategy distinct from its original's rhetorical strategy, it is probably not a version in its own right, but rather the product of a kind of tactical tinkering. Put another way, for a version to have its own textual identity, its revision strategy must create a theorizable distance from its predecessor.

For instance, Bradbury's removal of Fedallah and reassignment of his death to Ahab is an erasure designed primarily, no doubt, for no other tactical reason than to cut the film to a manageable length, but as an erasure of the Orient, the removal of Fedallah also appears strategic to readers; it now has interpretive consequences: the substitution of Fedallah's orientalism with Ahab's Christian martyrdom re-makes the film's conclusion into an argument against cold war fanaticism. Needless to say, the loss of Fedallah is a missed opportunity to critique orientalism in a twentieth-century context, just as Melville had critiqued it in his own century. Instead, the film's rhetorical revision strategy is to privilege cold war anxieties over Middle East tensions, which in 1956 were no less evident in the Third World than in 1851, and which by 2001 would prove disastrous globally.

Said's privileging of Bradbury's adaptation in order to crystallize the relation of America and terrorism reveals another, more ironic rhetorical strategy. In his adaptive revision of Bradbury's announced adaptation, Said redirects reactionary Western anger

against terrorists on to the causes of terrorism. Said's version of *Moby-Dick* re-focuses attention on the Orient but not as a conscious critique of Bradbury's erasure. By attributing the film's death scene to Melville, Said mixes versions and reveals a rhetorical path not taken: by stressing Ahab's anger as conveyed through Bradbury, Said forgets Fedallah's prophesy of Ahab's demise and Fedallah's far deeper warning of the East's revenge upon the West. These three textual identities – Melville's novel, Bradbury's screenplay, Said's remix – are versions of a work called *Moby-Dick*. Each grew from a textual identity that precedes it; each is vitally connected to the other; each involves adaptive revisions; and each is definable by its distinct revision strategy.

While I do not have space here to propose detailed protocols for the editing of adaptation, I would be remiss in not underscoring the critical function of fluid text editing. If Said's appropriation of Melville tells us anything, it is that our ability to forget textual identities is itself meaningful. Our role as editors and interpreters of adaptation is to prevent amnesia. The critical and ethical function of editing is to preserve not just the past, but also our textual links to the past.

With today's swiftly advancing digital technology, textual editing is now poised to bring readers in contact with all versions of a written work. In the Melville Electronic Library (MEL), an online critical archive of Melville's writing and texts associated with it, users will be able to witness the array of versions associated with Melville's works. With a tool called TextLab, presently under development at Hofstra University, they will be able to mark-up revision sites on manuscript leaves, transcribe the revision texts on those leaves, generate revision sequences that show the steps Melville took in revising his text, and then compose revision narratives that explain the sequence of steps. TextLab will also allow you to generate a full diplomatic transcription of each leaf, a base version of the text that maps all revision sites, sequences and narratives; and a user-friendly 'reading text' of the work in manuscript. Visitors to MEL will also have access to TextLab and can work interactively with scholars to track revisions and develop alternative revision sequences and narratives. With another tool called Melville ReMix being developed at MIT, users can create links between sources, Melville texts and adaptations. For instance, they might bring into one digital workspace texts from Shakespeare

or from plagiarized whaling sources together with their corresponding adaptive revisions in *Moby-Dick*. Or they could bring together four variant texts: Melville's original of Ahab's death scene, Bradbury's film script, Huston's filming of that script and Said's quotation of it. Such editorial tools as TextLab and Melville ReMix empower readers to visualize, narrativize and critically reproduce the otherwise invisible energy fields that constitute the cultural revisions embedded in adaptation. And by participating in these interpretive and editorial acts, readers will engage in a new kind of critical thinking that asks them to read texts as they evolve, and to see their own identities and their culture's identity as a form of evolution as well.

Textual editors like to retell a little allegory, which I here freely adapt for a conclusion on adaptation. One day a ship set sail, and in its long journey, it would stop in one port after another to refit its riggings. After many years at sea, the crew had replaced each rope, plank and rib of the ship. It had replaced the rotted deck, and put up new sails, masts and spars. The crew as well had changed; the sailors had died or run off and been replaced by new seamen; the first and second mates had died. The skipper was replaced as well. Even the name of the ship and its figurehead were changed. In fact, the owners had sold it to another shipping firm. So after its many years at sea, and when the ship finally returned to port, not a sliver of the original ship had survived. So, I put it to you: What is this ship?

As an announced retelling of an earlier work, an adaptation cannot exist without its tether to its originating source. When audiences lose their hold on this tether, the adaptation becomes at best a retelling only, like a fairy tale whose Ur-text cannot be found. And if readers were to forget as well the original story it retells, the adaptation would become perhaps an originating textual identity of its own, a text without a link to a defining past or originating source.

What, then, is this ship? A version or adaptation, moored in some way to the narrative of its origination? Or is it a vessel untethered, without a link to its former selves? Only memory keeps the ship tethered to its textual past. And critics and editors are the keepers of that memory.

## Notes

- 1 In *A Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), Linda Hutcheon offers a thoroughly substantiated alternative, arguing for the critical relevance of adaptation, calling it ‘repetition without replication’ (xvi, 7).
- 2 John Bryant, *The Fluid Text: Editing Revision for Book and Screen* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002). For further extensions on the critical applications of fluid text analysis and editing, see my ‘Versions of *Moby-Dick*: Plagiarism, Censorship, and Some Notes toward an Ethics of the Fluid Text,’ *Variants* 4 (2005): 1–27; and ‘Witness and Access: The Uses of the Fluid Text,’ *Textual Cultures* 2.1 (Spring 2007): 16–42.
- 3 This essay is an extension of the notion of ‘cultural revision’ introduced but not fully developed in *The Fluid Text* (62, 108–10). In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon draws a parallel between adaption and fluid texts in general (Hutcheon 95) and acknowledges her particular interest in adaptation as a form of ‘cultural revision’ (170–1). One focus here is to build on our independent but similar thinking on ‘oscillation’—a word we both use in different contexts regarding revision and the reading of originating and adaptive texts—as a way of addressing the need for and challenge of editing adaptation.
- 4 As Hutcheon succinctly puts it, ‘adaptors are first interpreters and then creators’ (18).
- 5 Like many who study adaptation, Hutcheon concludes that ‘In the workings of the imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception’ (177), and she is, therefore, inclined to include a wide-range of works under the rubric of adaptation. However, she draws the line at fragmentary as opposed to ‘extended engagements,’ such as literary allusion, echoes, musical sampling, and plagiarism (9, 170). My argument, though, is that these borrowings are one writer’s rewriting or version of another writer and as a form of ‘adaptive revision’ can be included as adaptation.
- 6 Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, (ed.) Lynn C. Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), 120.
- 7 Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales, and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, Harrison Hayford, Alma MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (eds) (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 244, 245.

- 8 John Bryant, 'Moby-Dick as Revolution,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, (ed.) Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 65–90. Rpt. in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Moby-Dick* (Chelsea House, 2007).
- 9 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Longman, 2006), Ch. 119.
- 10 John Bryant, 'Rewriting *Moby-Dick*: Politics, Textual Identity, and the Revision Narrative.' *PMLA* 125.4 (2010): 1043–60. In revising part of the Said section of the 2010 essay for inclusion in this section of my 2012 essay on adaptation, I freely acknowledge the irony of this 'adaptive revision' designed to adapt an earlier text so that it will speak more directly to the problem of adaptation. I have added text and terminology not present in the originating text, and I am happy for the opportunity to do so because the revision process has given me new words by which to explain myself more clearly.
- 11 Edward Said, 'There Are Many Islams,' *London Observer* (16 September 2001).
- 12 David Barsamian, 'Edward Said Interview,' *The Progressive*. The Progressive Magazine. November 2001. Web. 12 October 2008.
- 13 Andersen, Kurt. 'He Rises' (interview with Ray Bradbury). *American Icons: Moby-Dick*. Studio 360, Public Radio International. n.d. Web. 12 October 2008.
- 14 Melville (2006), 496.
- 15 Melville (2006), 175.
- 16 Edward Said, *Orientalism*. 25th Anniversary edn. (1978; New York: Vintage, 2003), 71–72.
- 17 Said, 72.
- 18 Melville (2006), 202.
- 19 Melville (2006), 160.
- 20 Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein, *Melville's Orienda* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 230.
- 21 Finkelstein, 234.
- 22 Melville (2006), 500.



