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Melville Incomplete

Christopher Ohge*

The final volume of Melville's uncompleted writings by the Northwestern-Newberry edition (hereafter NN) is a monumental achievement. Monumental but also vexed, and vexing. Melville's unfinished poetry and especially his unfinished novella *Billy Budd* challenge traditional editorial theories of eclectic editing that have guided the NN editions for decades. Although the NN series has stood out among its peers of print editions informed by the ideas of W. W. Greg, Fredson Bowers, and G. Thomas Tanselle (among others), the final volume remains beholden to a theory of critical editing that is less suited to the purpose of editing unfinished manuscripts than of works that exist solely in print versions. This dilemma makes the volume a fascinating instance of the choices editors must make in the era of digital editions, a development that in principle aspires to greater transparency, computational efficiency, and multi-disciplinary collaboration. Some of Melville's unfinished manuscripts require editorial intervention for the purposes of making a coherent reading text, but the NN edition under review shows the risks of presenting an eclectic reading text of an unfinished work. A manuscript is a physical manifestation of shifting intentions. A clear, eclectic text will by its nature privilege its version over other versions (whether of other previous editions or of the manuscript itself), while distancing readers from the dynamics of revision that are on display in the surviving manuscripts. The reading texts give the illusion of completeness, regardless of the editors' acknowledgments of its incompleteness in the back matter. One assumes that the reading texts will eventually be reprinted without the textual notes in future editions.

Billy Budd was rushed into publication as part of the Melville revival in the 1920s to complete the Constable edition of

Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Uncompleted Writings, by Herman Melville, edited by Harrison Hayford et al. *The Writings of Herman Melville*, edited by Hershel Parker et al., volume 13, Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 2017.

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the author's works, despite the challenges of assembling a text from an unfinished manuscript that was left in a container on his desk. Thus began the canonization of *Billy Budd*, a text-in-progress, halted by mortality, that occasioned flawed editions beginning with Raymond Weaver's Constable edition in 1924 and followed by F. Barron Freeman's 1948 Harvard University Press edition. Flawed, because they not only were riddled with transcription errors but also gave the wrong impression of a finished text, which was perhaps best evidenced by Weaver's decision to print a discarded section following chapter 19 as the preface. *Billy Budd* therefore came before the public as an apparently finished work for decades before Merton Sealts, Jr., and Harrison Hayford published their extraordinary study of the manuscript in the 1962 University of Chicago Press genetic edition. And their reading text and genetic transcription continue to be the reliable standard. The resulting situation is a canonical but imperfect text with an irrational historical (and sometimes market-driven) mandate in place for a clean copy of Melville's final masterpiece. Building on Sealts, Jr., and Hayford's work, the NN edition provides a new, critical, unmodernized text of *Billy Budd*. One admirable improvement is that, instead of regularizing aspects of Melville's punctuation and copyediting his phraseology as the Hayford-Sealts edition does to the reading text, the NN edition generally attempts to preserve the rough quality of the manuscript. The NN edition, while mainly improving upon the Hayford-Sealts text, still takes some perplexing liberties with the manuscript.

The general editor Hershel Parker has been an effective explicator of *Billy Budd*, not only showing that it is unfinished but also arguing that it is impossible to interpret as a complete text (see his *Reading Billy Budd* [1990]). Wyn Kelley put it best, that it is "one story, multiple versions, not a few bypaths," evoking Melville's narrator's own apologia for the "literary sin" of his digressive style (128). In 1888 Melville attempted a fair copy in ink of an expanded prose story which had preceded a ballad he had originally composed about a sailor facing execution. He revised this new story in the process of copying, reshuffled many sections, and cut and pasted leaves. He then returned to earlier and middle sections of the work to revise further, complicating the ethical and psychological dimensions of Captain Vere and emphasizing the inherent malignancy of Billy's nemesis, Claggart. He continued to revise, usually in pencil, until his death in 1891, but never had the chance to finish revising. It is possible that, if he had lived, Melville would have produced another ink fair copy based on his extensive revisions. But since he did not, one could argue that editors of *Billy Budd* should present a diplomatic or

semi-diplomatic text—which Tanselle acknowledges in his “General Note on the Text” (368). For understandable reasons, the NN editors decided to present both a critically edited reading text as well as a diplomatic text, coded with genetic symbols, in the back matter.

It is curious that the NN edition’s diplomatic transcription of *Billy Budd* copied the conventions of the Hayford-Sealts edition, a kind of genetic text—with cumbersome sigla adapted from the Harvard edition of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journals—that was a product of a print-only publishing context. Better alternatives now exist for diplomatic transcription. One example is the Mark Twain Project’s much more readable “plain text” method employed in their University of California Press letters editions. There also is a better way to produce machine-readable genetic editions that can be amenable to computation, analysis, and digital publication. A working digital text is already available on the Melville Electronic Library (hereafter MEL), which not only marks up the *Billy Budd* manuscript in TEI-XML (the professional standard for descriptive markup of digital editions), but also matches Melville’s revisions to the facsimile of the manuscript page with its TextLab transcription tool. Aloof to new and enormously useful electronic resources, the NN transcription also represents a huge amount of duplicated effort, and a lost opportunity for collaboration with the digital project. This is not to criticize the accuracy of Tanselle’s updating of Hayford’s otherwise exact transcription; rather, it is an example of misdirected resources as well as a lingering philosophical problem in textual scholarship. Some editors distrust the supposed ephemerality of digital editions and retain a preference for a print-first workflow. Yet the NN’s print-only text, with its unwieldy genetic information, has to contend with the obvious utility of MEL’s digital text, with its rich descriptive markup, accessibility, and amenability to research. For example, with the MEL *Billy Budd* a digital researcher could create a list of all late-stage pencil revisions or access notes on “revision sequences” that explain what one sees on the manuscript facsimile. As to misdirected resources, the NN editors could have coordinated with the scholars working on the digital transcription of the manuscript for MEL, and the NN transcription could have linked to MEL as an open-access online resource, instead of being a separate text in the back matter of an expensive book.

A similar kind of dismissiveness occurs elsewhere—for example, in the appendix of the surviving manuscript fragments of *Typee*, a novel which is neither late nor incomplete. The *Typee* manuscript fragments have already been published in an electronic edition, by John Bryant, which is mentioned in the introduction to the

transcription in parentheses briefly, but the NN explicitly characterizes its transcription as “made independently”; again, a lost opportunity for collaboration (940). Moreover, Bryant’s *Typee* edition received the seal of approval from the MLA Committee on Scholarly Editions, so the NN should have explained in more detail why and how their transcription differs.

Regarding the reading texts, even with NN’s admirable policy of preserving as much of Melville’s rough text as possible, the editors struggle with the issue of authorial intention in ways that limit their effectiveness. As the “General Note on the Text” indicates, the critical texts in the volume aim “to present Melville’s intention in the act of writing—indeed, his latest intention at points where the manuscripts show his revisions of earlier intentions” (368–69). The note adds that the unfinished nature of the writings means that “it would be wrong to say that the NN texts reflect Melville’s final intention for each work; they simply aim to offer his latest intentions evident in the manuscripts that have survived” (369). It also offers a rationale for emendation: “Carrying out this aim requires making some alterations in the wording, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling of the latest text present in each document” (369). This policy (far from simple) is defensible insofar as editors make minor changes (as they reliably do in many instances in the NN) in obvious mistakes of omission, redundancy, and (sometimes) spelling. In other, more difficult cases the NN editors attempt to deal with Melville’s so-called incomplete revisions by changing what Melville has demonstrably inscribed in the manuscript. My best understanding of a “latest intention” is that which is evident in the latest version of the manuscript, but the NN editors sometimes adopt the reading of an earlier intention when a late revision is abortive or incomplete. Their decisions sometimes involve a Platonic leap into an ideal version of the text. As a result, some of their attempts to emend the apparent “latest intention” of an incomplete revision adopt a logic of conjectural emendation similar to an assumed final intention in eclectic text editing, a conclusion that is reinforced by language such as “presumably/presuming,” “perhaps intended,” and “might/would have” in the textual notes.

Any attempt to edit a reading text of Melville’s unfinished work will inevitably finish some of Melville’s thinking for him. Editors could also imagine myriad possible changes Melville could have made, but if Melville did not show them in the manuscript, editors should refrain from revising on Melville’s behalf and retain as much of what is in the manuscript as possible, even if it is not perfectly consistent. Parker asserts at the end of his “Historical Note” that “after Melville made the late pencil revisions [to *Billy Budd*] the story became extremely difficult if not impossible to interpret as a

whole”—and that “to close our eyes to the relation between artistic imperfection and failing health is to dehumanize the creative process and the created product”—“even in their imperfect forms,” he adds in the next paragraph (365). It is difficult to reconcile Parker’s conclusion with a critical text that changes Melville’s words based on the editor’s judgment of Melville’s intentions, latest or otherwise, and sometimes restores earlier (prerevised) readings. Even though the editors do represent Melville’s original process in the textual notes and genetic transcription, those editorial annotations are inadequate to the task of giving readers access to Melville’s process compared to other available computational tools. It remains difficult for the NN to show the elements of Melville’s creative process.

The editors sometimes make a pragmatic choice between potential readings when none (or all) were crossed out, or when Melville forgot to replace punctuation or correct a redundancy. For example, it should be uncontroversial that the Hayford-Sealts and NN editions make all instances of the ship’s name *Bellipotent* consistent throughout the text, even though there are undeleted instances of its former name *Indomitable* in the manuscript. The editorial decision to complete Melville’s uncompleted revision in this case is advisable, if only to prevent reader confusion over the name of Billy’s new ship. But what can an editor do when Melville added a word above an undeleted word as a potential revision, and never struck out one or the other? In such cases, multiple options exist in the place of one word. In some instances the editors have imagined what Melville *might* have changed or restored if he had lived long enough to finish the book. As Tanselle says, Melville “often failed to carry a revision through completely, leaving a construction that is obviously incoherent and clearly unintended,” so the reading text “attempts to bring about the intended reading” (369). In other instances, the confusion in the manuscripts provides grounds to choose an earlier reading that was more complete (but which is not a latest intention) or to print an eclectic reading that the editors prefer over the manuscript. The problem with their reasoning is that they seem to think of intentionality as a clear and linear moment (such that one can demarcate a latest intention from previous ones), and that as editors they have the capacity to “bring about an intended reading” when an author has not finished the task of revision. Melville could have completed any of the incomplete revisions in any amount of possible ways, many of which are impossible to know. As a result, despite the accuracy of the diplomatic text of *Billy Budd* in the editorial appendix, the reading text has some questionable emendations.

In chapter 1, for example, the editors changed “he” to “handsome sailor” in the section where Melville writes that Billy

Budd “evinced nothing of the dandified Billy-be-Dam, an amusing character all but extinct now” (3–4). After expanding on Billy-be-Dam’s character, Melville writes on the next leaf that “Invariably a proficient in his perilous calling, *he* was also more or less of a mighty boxer or wrestler” (443, emphasis added). The “he” in that sentence is emended to “handsome sailor” in the NN edition because the phrase is an “incomplete revision” that “would presumably have been rectified by Melville”—“presumably,” the justification for radically changing the text based on a nonexistent variant in the manuscript (410). Hayford did not emend “he” in the University of Chicago text because the referent was clear enough in context. The NN change reveals a type of unwarranted meddling in the edition that occurs elsewhere.

Melville’s late pencil revisions to the description of Claggart’s evil nature at the end of chapter 13 exemplify the problems of incomplete revision. Following Melville’s changes, one passage reads “The Pharisee is the Guy Fawks prowling in the hid chambers underlying the Claggart” (32). Here NN does not refer to latest intention but restores an earlier intention (partly because the unrevised “they” in the next sentence refers to “some natures”), so it settles with the original sentence before Melville undertook the revision: “The Pharisee is the Guy Fawks prowling in the hid chambers underlying some natures like Claggart’s.” Yet Melville deleted “is” (and his superlinear addition of “being”), “some natures like,” and “s” after “Claggart” (419–20). His substituting “the” for “some natures” is a mystery, as is the deletion of “is” and “being.” Another plausible reading, which is closer to the manuscript, would be: “The Pharisee is the Guy Fawks prowling in the hid chambers underlying Claggart.” By restoring the deleted “is” and ignoring the addition of “the,” one can see the difference in emphasis: “underlying Claggart” is a more direct expression of Claggart’s evil than “some natures like Claggart.” This reflects other late-stage revisions where Melville reinforces Claggart’s inherent evil in line with the pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer, whom Melville was reading voraciously at the end of his life (see Ohge, “Melville’s Late Reading and the Revisions in the *Billy Budd* Manuscript”). The original phrase muddles through both a metaphor and a simile, whereas the revisions gestured toward a more forceful metaphor.

That revised sentence, however, is still not satisfying, because the plural pronoun in the following sentence would erroneously refer to “chambers” instead of “some natures like Claggart.” Should the editor then change “they” to “he”? While it is true that “Melville clearly did not intend this reading,” he also clearly did intend to revise the sentence (420). Here is a good example of the shiftiness of the editors’ meaning of intention. Melville’s revisions show the

impossibility of producing a truly final text that is faithful to the manuscript (or his latest intentions). In either case, the editor is either copyediting Melville to gain readability while losing the nuances of what is in the manuscript, or letting Melville's wording stand at the risk of offering an incoherent text that accurately reflects Melville's incomplete writing process. In such instances, to make the text more coherent, the NN reading text misrepresents what the manuscript actually shows and privileges one version of what Melville had in mind over various other, no less viable options. Therefore, it seems inconsistent to use a latest-intention policy that sometimes restores a wording that Melville attempted to revise (unless by "latest intention" they mean "the latest complete and coherent intention," but that is not clearly stated, and even that would leave out a lot of nuance in the manuscript). With NN's reading text, readers have no way of knowing these problems, unless, after some frustration with navigating between the reading text and the textual apparatus in the back of the book, the reader absorbs the textual notes and the genetic transcriptions. Readers may then have a closer experience with Melville's creative process, but the textual apparatus makes it hard to gain a clear sense of the textual problem from this NN edition. MEL's approach is much easier.

Melville also wrote new sections at a late stage that may have been early drafts for further consideration. For example, in chapter 20, where Melville was developing Captain Vere's character by either making him ambivalent or insane about executing Billy, the narrator asks, "Was he unhinged?" (48). He wrote that whole section in pencil (with multiple deletions, additions, and restorations). Parts of the page were so heavily revised that it is difficult to be confident of some wordings or whether some deletions were to be restored (511–12). The section is likely a rough draft of a section in this brief yet crucial chapter, one which he probably would have revised further and copied out in ink in a later fair copy. This also comes after Melville cancelled several leaves of material after chapter 19, in which Vere is not unhinged but "prudent," and the Surgeon takes on a different aspect by comparing Claggart's death to the "divine judgement on Annannias" while "thinking how more than futile the utmost discretion sometimes proves in this human sphere" (423–24).

In the next chapter, Melville changed the composition of Billy's court martial in later revisions, but he did not reflect that change in all instances of the "junior Lieutenant." In one case, when Vere consults with each member of the court, the NN editors had to make a choice: they select "Sailing Master," since that was the only officer who had not yet spoken at Billy's trial (56). Which is fair enough, but in the next paragraph, Vere says in the manuscript, "Lieutenant, were that clearly lawful. . . ." The NN editors emended

that phrase to “My man, were that clearly lawful,” because “My man” is “an appellation habitually used by Vere” (427). But it is quite an assumption that Melville would have eventually written “My man” (the Hayford-Sealts text offered an equally conjectural reading of “Gentlemen” there). Vere also uses “my good man,” and not once does he begin a sentence with “My man” anywhere else in the book. One could also make the conservative case to delete “Lieutenant” and start the sentence with “Were that lawful,” but the larger point is that unless readers are also consulting the diplomatic text, they have no reason but to think that Melville actually wrote “My man” in that instance. The fact is he did not, and no one can know how he would have resolved this problem.

The end of chapter 24 illustrates other problems that the eclectic editing of a reading text cannot rectify. For example, when the narrator ponders the ethical dilemma of Billy’s innocence, Melville wrote a marginal note in pencil, “[an irruption of heretic thought / hard to suppress]” (430). Although this is a crucial note suggesting the irreverent direction Melville was taking his story—and perhaps a sign that he still intended to develop the section further—it is not included in the reading text, for obvious reasons, but a reader can only access it as a textual note in the back matter. Here again the digital approach is a better alternative: the MEL digital text makes this note more accessible to readers in its diplomatic transcription.

At the end of chapter 25, Melville significantly rewrote Billy’s execution scene without settling on a satisfactory ending that describes Billy’s lifeless “pinioned figure” in relation to the ship’s motion. As Melville copied in ink and revised the final sentence in pencil, it ends with “the slow roll of the hull, in moderate weather so majestic in a great ship ponderously-cannoned” (533). But Melville then bracketed “in moderate . . . cannoned,” indicated in a marginal note to move that phrase to the previous page, and ended the sentence with “the ship’s motion” instead of “the slow roll of the hull” (533). Afterward, he deleted the marginal note, which, according to the editors, “presumably” signals Melville’s intention to restore the bracketed phrase, but that is far from certain on the manuscript (he could have intended to simply retain “ship’s motion” without moving the bracketed phrase; or perhaps he was unsure of what to do next). Because of the incompleteness of the revisions, the NN edition disregards Melville’s late addition of “ship’s motion” and restores the wording before he bracketed the final part of the sentence—“as Melville presumably intended doing” (65, 431). The NN edition cannot offer an efficient way to tell the difference between leaves like these, with Melville’s unvarnished mind on display in *medias res*, and other ones that were earlier inked fair copies and subject to less revision.

The poems collected in *Weeds and Wildings* and *Parthenope* are a boon to readers, showing more evidence of Melville's poetic gifts and the result of a lifelong pursuit of studying and of writing poetry. Yet the NN reading texts also show some questionable emendations similar to those in *Billy Budd*. A brief examination reveals some editorial overreaches involving the adding and deleting of punctuation in the *Weeds and Wildings* poems. Now, to many poets, punctuation is sacrosanct—and Melville's eccentric punctuation was sometimes more rhetorical than grammatical (for example, with his tendency to preface an exclamation point with a comma, which the NN deleted). The edition also seems to impose conventional rules of grammar on this nineteenth-century writer. For example, the final line of the poem "Madcaps" reads in its latest manuscript, "It is Lilly and Cherry / Companioned by Butterflies / Madcaps as merry!" The NN editors added a line-end comma after "Butterflies," presumably because the first version, titled "Wild-Strawberry Hunters"—that was inscribed on a superseded *Billy Budd* verso leaf—originally read "Companioned by butterflies, / Madcaps as merry." (Melville changed the period to an exclamation point.) That line in the poem's second version (a fair copy by Melville, retitled "Strawberry Hunters" then "Madcaps") has no line-end comma, and it makes sense as it is (83, 580–81).

Likewise, in "The Blue-Bird," the editors added a line-end comma after "air" in the second line of the first stanza, which actually reads in Melville's manuscript: "Beneath yon Larkspur's azure bells / That sun their bees in balmy air / In mould no more the Blue-Bird dwells / Tho' late he found interment there" (582). (The NN regularizes "Tho'" to "Though.") The NN text of the second stanza oddly decides to select a period in these lines: "When shrill the March piped overhead. / And Pity gave him sepulchre" (86)—but the manuscript appears to show a comma after "overhead" and it does sound better with a comma (the textual note in the back of the book acknowledges that it might be a comma, but I would have chosen a comma and written a note saying it might be a period). The poem might not adhere perfectly to grammatical rules, but I would make the case that the poem starts out in a manic way, and with each stanza the rests increase, culminating in the final stanza: "But, look, the clear ethereal hue / In June it makes the Larkspur's dower; / It is the self-same welkin-blue— / The Bird's transfigured in the Flower!" (86, 582). Good poets vary their punctuation to achieve an effect. Regardless of my judgments—and the NN editors', for that matter—about the punctuation, the textual cruxes in these unfinished poems provide yet another indication of what is lost by not giving readers more direct access to Melville's revision process.

Elsewhere, such as in “The Lover and the Syringa bush,” the editors delete punctuation. The latter half of the poem in the manuscript reads

To me like these you show, Syringa,
Such heightning power has love, believe,
While here by Eden’s gate I linger
Love’s tryst to keep, with truant Eve. (582–83)

The editors deleted Melville’s comma after “keep” in the final line (87). The presumably unfinished manuscript shows that Melville deleted “with truant Eve” in multiple strokes before apparently restoring it. Again, the line makes sense as Melville left it, even if it might seem awkward. But try reading it aloud. Melville’s comma marks a caesura that follows from other pauses in the previous lines, which invoke the Syringa and that powerful imperative, “believe”—the pausing of “believe” before the pause in belief in Eve. The NN editors’ emendation changes the poem’s rhythm and tension at the conclusion.

These textual issues all bespeak an approach to authoritative editing that seeks to present the best text from the available materials in a print scholarly publication. I have appreciated that approach in many other editions, including the NN *Moby-Dick* (1988), as well as my own work on the Mark Twain Project’s University of California Press editions of the *Autobiography* (2015) and the forthcoming *Innocents Abroad*, but this final NN edition raises a larger question about how to edit unfinished manuscripts that require more accountability and responsiveness to readers and researchers. The NN editors did not adequately embrace how scholarly editing is changing with computational methods. As an alternative, the digital editions in progress at MEL offer a more direct representation of manuscripts in revision and a closer engagement with Melville’s creative process.

The NN editors did not adequately embrace how scholarly editing is changing with computational methods. . . . the digital editions in progress at MEL offer a more direct representation of manuscripts in revision and a closer engagement with Melville’s creative process.

The “Historical Note” accompanying the texts is sometimes unfocused and contentious. While undoubtedly reflecting Parker’s expansive knowledge of Melville, the note begins with a lengthy justification of what Parker has already argued repeatedly in other venues, including Melville’s attempts to publish a novel titled *The Isle of the Cross* in 1853 and a collection of poems in 1860, which was rejected by at least two publishers (see his two-volume *Herman Melville* biography, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, the “Historical Note” in the NN *Published Poems* edition, and *Melville Biography: An Inside Narrative*). Some scholars have either dismissed Parker’s claims outright, despite the convincing evidence, or minimized their significance in favor of a misleading

idea that Melville wrote nine novels and some magazine pieces between 1846 and 1857 and experienced a poetic turn years later when he wrote his Civil War poems collected in *Battle-Pieces* (1866). Parker's note is supposed to examine the historical context of *Billy Budd* and other uncompleted writings mostly from Melville's later years. Instead, it sometimes dwells on tedious reiterations of academic grievances, evidenced by lines such as "Damage to Melville scholarship (quite aside from damage to Parker's reputation) has been compounded by this succession of false accusations" (306–7). Melville was indeed a lifelong student of poetry, and he also started writing poetry in the late 1850s. While some scholars have simply neglected the importance and craft of Melville's poetic oeuvre, that has been changing with the work of poets Rosanna Warren and Susan Howe, the critic Helen Vendler, as well as the excellent essays collected in *Melville as Poet: The Art of "Pulsed Life,"* edited by Sanford Marovitz (2013).

The "Historical Note" starts to succeed when it addresses the trajectory of Melville's uncritical use of "picturesque" from its early appearance in *Typee* (1846) to the more nuanced doubleness of the term (starting around the 1850s and 1860s) and suggests Melville's struggle to conceive both painterly natural beauty and the forces of tyranny and evil on earth. Hence, in "Rip Van Winkle's Lilac," the centerpiece of *Weeds and Wildings*, Melville prefaces a strange portrait of the "meditative vagabondo" artist seeking the "Picturesque" with the Van Winkles' attempts to cut down the weeping willow tree near their uncompleted house that stands as "a monument of the negative victory of stubborn inertia over spasmodic activity and an ineffectual implement" (110). Parker also points to a similar tension in the *Parthenope* poems and the poem "To Daniel Shepherd." The more relevant and informative latter section of the note also details Melville's appreciation of ancient Greece and Italy, his social isolation, and his physical ailments as crucial context to his later work.

It should be stressed that the NN edition of Melville's writings is a venerable contribution to scholarship spreading over several generations. Its final volume is a valuable resource. Even so, the debatable emendations of unfinished manuscripts, coupled with the dismissal of the currently available digital resources for manuscript study, shows that the reading texts should be consulted with some skepticism and with recourse to the surviving manuscripts, many of which are now available thanks to digital initiatives. The edition would have been even better with a textual policy that suits the materials at hand rather than yielding as it did to an overarching, prescriptive Textual Policy of previous editions

in the NN series. Then this edition could have more clearly accepted the process of Melville's last projects with a forward-thinking, collaborative spirit.

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