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The Gospel According to Melville : BILLY BUDD as an Altered Christ-Parable

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MELVILLE: BILLY BUDD AS AN ALTERED CHRIST-PARABLE

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MELVILLE: BILLY BUDD AS AN ALTERED CHRIST-PARABLE

Most critics, having undertaken to interpret Melville's Billy Budd, have found it necessary to insert somewhere in their commentary, a light disclaimer[1] on the fallibility of their view. This is less an aspersion upon Melville scholarship than a frank recognition of the peculiar nature of his final work. Billy Budd is a novel of profound moral and social subtlety, told with a disarming and often misleading simplicity.

But its opacity takes nothing away from its quality. Students who approach Billy Budd should be accustomed to the Melville of Moby Dick and White Jacket. If they are, they will be attracted only by the subtlety of the moral dilemma outlined in the later story, they will expect to find ambiguity, and they will not expect to explain the last twist of the plot to the satisfaction of every critic.

Melville wound his meanings, mummy-like, in several folds of protective subterfuge. To uncover the innermost meaning involves a process of unwinding. On the other hand, the story is given a dramatic setting and structure in which the characters enter and perform as in a play. The reader looks on from a distance, the view sometimes obscured by a metaphysical and artistic haze only occasionally improved

[1]Note: My disclaimer comes at the end.

by the explanations of the stage manager himself.

I shall try to keep up with both techniques, examining the play-characters in the light of their actions and loyalties, and following in a circular fashion the folds enveloping the conflict.

Melville's selection of a setting for his narrative was carefully made and probably thought out well in advance. The Somers[2] affair had been well publicized, and Melville had surely recognized its literary possibilities much earlier, when he included a diatribe in White Jacket upon the state of order aboard a man-of-war which could make such an incident possible.

Billy Budd's misadventure is given something of the character of a myth in that it welds a multiplicity of allusion into a disarmingly simple narrative. In utilizing to the full the social issues then at stake, Melville, most critics agree, has fashioned a morality play, the principals involved being personifications of various social or moral issues. At the point where the issues are first recognized in their factual settings, and before they are aligned and weighed for relative importance, they occupy several distinct but complementary levels.

With no thought of issues, a person may read Billy Budd as a good tale, since it fulfills most of the demands for an entertaining piece of fiction. But the casual reader for plot will often find himself distracted by numerous references to current political events; he will be inclined to take the author at his word and call them "digressions."

[2]Note: In 1842, a young midshipman, Philip Spencer, and two other sailors aboard the brig Somers were charged with mutiny. Hauled before a drumhead court, they were adjudged guilty and hanged at the yard-arm. The presiding officer, Guert Gansevoort, had been a cousin of Melville's.

These digressions were designed for another class of reader,[3] having been included to give depth and background to the immediate tale. To arrive at the deeper levels of the novel's meaning, the serious reader finds them indispensable.

Looking further into the social allusions, the scholar discovers still a deeper layer. He finds that the social forces in ferment closely parallel moral and religious issues, both in fact and for the author's specific purposes. Revolutionary liberalism to Melville was more than a political term; it was a gospel representing, in its full consequences, a radical new political and moral order in life. The French Revolution, often alluded to in Billy Budd, should, in the context, be taken for rather more than one nation's uprising; it was the emblem of the freeing of the human spirit from old shackles.

Billy Budd occupies, in time, the period following the Revolution, when the conflict between the old order and the new was the most widely dispersed, when the issues were still being hotly contested, yet before the old order was forced to its knees. It was a time of confusion and anarchy. Old values were questioned and, in fact, often discarded before being questioned. Where the revolutionaries destroyed, they often failed to rebuild, and conservative voices could still, with a degree of confidence, articulate a defense.

The new order, on the other hand, was not mute; it had its spokesmen. But while they proliferated, the great mass of men continued

[3]Note: In this classification of readers I am indebted to Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel With God (Princeton, 1952).

simply to react to forces they accepted as out of their realm. They succumbed or revolted, with only a vague knowledge of their place in the conflict. They entered that momentous era equipped with a palpable practical knowledge of the shortcomings of the old order, but with only such a theoretical awareness of the new order as could seep slowly into their numbed consciousnesses.

Some critics, intrigued by the wealth of social allusion in the novel and having come this far in their analysis, have stopped to build a social interpretation, either evaluating the moral overtones as subsidiary, or disregarding them altogether. Carl E. Zink is an extreme example. Billy Budd, says he, "is a social allegory, the last of Herman Melville's criticisms of social injustice as he saw it in nineteenth-century America."[4] Another, Oliver Snyder, notes the novel's mythic character, but interprets the myth as historically, rather than morally, oriented: "Relating it to basic and timeless myths, Melville wrote a great political mystery drama, and gave us a brilliant insight into historical process."[5]

More often than not, however, the social implications, while being recognized, have been subordinated to the moral, and it is about the moral issue that the preponderance of criticism has focused. The reader who seeks a political interpretation will find it, but if he looks deeper he will find somewhat more.

[4]"Herman Melville and the Forms--Irony and Social Criticism in Billy Budd," Accent, XII (1952), 131. Note: It was social injustice in "nineteenth-century America," despite the fact that the man-of-war and her crew were British. On the other hand, one is inclined to ask, if the crisis was American, or British, why not international?

[5]"A Note on Billy Budd," Accent, XI (1951), 60.

To draw a line, in human concerns, between matters moral and social is almost impossible. Every moral precept has its social consequences; and every act of social significance somewhere, sometime, rubs shoulders with an ethic. Such is the nature of human experience. And those critics who have emphasized the social implications of Billy Budd's story, while justifiable in their cognizance of the effects of the revolution upon society, should not have neglected the possible moral implications. That there are moral overtones is suggested by the number of critics who, not being blind to the social theme, have looked behind it to the moral involvement of each character in the trial and execution of Billy Budd.

For confirmation of the moral nature of the novel's conflict, the critic need but study Billy's trial before the drumhead court. Billy had committed a crime which under martial law called for death. In a sense, Billy died the moment he killed Claggart; by the nature of the law, there could be no extenuation. Hence, argument upon moral grounds was extraneous. Vere knew that. Yet the captain was not a whit less morally involved than if he had not been responsible to the martial code: he was also a man, responsible to the integrity of humanity.

That responsibility he disavowed promptly, in order to forestall an act of leniency which would have compromised his position. By introducing the moral issue, he hoped quickly to dispose of it. To the lieutenants he said: "But tell me whether or not, occupying the position we do, private conscience should not yield to that imperial one formu-

lated in the code under which alone we officially proceed?"[6] Further to excuse his human responsibility, he said: "Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible."[7] That the captain felt constrained thus so exhaustively to elaborate upon his responsibilities is a measure of the moral content of the conflict comprising the central issue of Billy Budd.

Though the moral question is closed in the mind of Vere, it remains open and real to the other officers and to the crew. From that point (the trial) in its development, the issue is articulated in terms of opposing moral points of view. And, at the end, where articulation stops, Billy's death is the one cold reality. From there--as will later be pointed out--all events become consequent and social, but fraught, for the reader, with moralistic meaning.

Billy Budd's mythic quality referred to earlier in this study is, then, morally oriented. Melville, fitting his characters carefully into an appropriate perspective and giving them strongly pronounced loyalties, was able to concentrate an enormity of moral content within a short plot. The theme which he chose thus to represent consists of nothing less cosmic than the timeless opposition, in man, society, and religion, of two fundamental contraries: order at the expense of justice, and justice at the expense of order.

[6]Raymond Weaver, The Shorter Novels of Herman Melville (New York, 1928), p. 305. Note: This edition of Billy Budd will be used throughout.

[7]Ibid., p. 304.

The elemental significance of this conflict to the meaning of life cannot be exaggerated,[8] and the truest mark of its significance is its pervasiveness. Represented in as many forms as the human consciousness can reproduce, it probably lies closer than any other to the center of man's existence. Order versus justice is the conflict in the cycle of ebb and flow of society. This conflict touches the theologian and heretic alike to their separate endeavors. It is bound in some inscrutable way to that wall which limits human aspiration, inviting the suspicion that it constitutes the archetypal paradox, from which all the others radiate. Any final assessment of its total pervasiveness depends upon a point of private and, most commonly, religious belief. Melville's own treatment of the conflict is found throughout his work, including Billy Budd. It is the purpose of this paper to examine his artistic delineation of the issue as it appears in the death of Billy Budd, and to suggest his possible solution of it.

The principals in Melville's sea drama are fully characterized, be it noted, in only one particular: that to which they give allegiance. In a novel of Billy Budd's brevity, complete depiction of character was difficult. And for Melville's special purpose it was unnecessary. He needed only to depict those facets of character which would highlight the stand of each man upon the moral issue. Examined from this point of view, the characters most prominently delineated are Captain Vere, Billy, Claggart, and the ship's crew, the latter acting as a single body.

[8]Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 294, says the following: "Billy Budd has an archetypal depth and scope that no reader can quite mistake; it is Melville's version of a primordial fable, the fable of the Fall of Man, the loss of Paradise."

Within the drama itself, the roles of the characters differ in relation to the point of view from which each acts.

Captain Vere is established immediately as a man of social responsibility, an "aristocratic" type, of "serious mind." Although not possessing natural brilliance, he was given to a "certain dreaminess of mood,"[9] and was prone to gaze blankly out to sea. Notwithstanding this meditative quality, he was essentially a practical, efficient officer, the reader is told. To confirm his "positive convictions"--no doubt the substance of his meditations--he read widely among writers who dealt in "realities" and who wrote in a "spirit of common sense." Melville now adds to the picture by applying the personal characteristics given to the story's social perspective: "His settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion, social, political, and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no few minds in those days, minds by nature not inferior to his own."[10]

By this point in the novel the reader perceives that Vere is politically--and perhaps religiously--conservative, that he is, moreover, settled in his beliefs, and perhaps a trifle smug. Not to be left in doubt, the reader is told the manner and reason for Vere's opposition to liberal ideas: "Captain Vere <u>disinterestedly</u> opposed them because they seemed to him incapable of embodiment in <u>lasting institutions</u>, but at war with the <u>peace</u> of the world and the <u>true welfare of mankind</u>."[11]

The characterization of Vere is now complete: as a representative

[9]Weaver, p. 249.

[10]<u>Ibid.</u>, p. 251.

[11]<u>Ibid.</u> (Italics added).

of the status quo, he resisted change, confident in his own convictions because of the upheaval of forms which change necessitated. So comfortable was he in his opinion that he could ruminate upon the cataclysmic events taking place about him, detachedly self-assured of what constituted man's best interests. Later he could say, in justification of Billy's execution, "With mankind . . . forms, measured forms, are everything."[12]

Of Claggart, the master-at-arms, the reader gleans much of his information in whispers. This character is left by Melville in a haze of obscurity. His origin is vaguely sinister. Gossip among the crew suggested a criminal offense for which he was paying aboard a man-of-war. Melville, however, offers the reader a piece of privileged information: Claggart is in reality a madman, "in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living but born with him and innate, in short 'a depravity according to nature.'"[13]

Billy is Melville's Handsome Sailor, and he is characterized as a heroic rather than as a realistic type. The Handsome Sailor is natural man, a "barbarian," who, while not possessed of childlike ignorance, yet retains the innocence of childhood.

Just as Claggart is naturally depraved, Billy comes by his innocence naturally. Neither is responsible for his condition, or for his presence in the man-of-war world. Budd was impressed; Claggart was

[12]Ibid., p. 323.

[13]Ibid., p. 266.

apparently exiled to the world of human experience. And in each case the natural condition is binding and complete. Billy, totally oblivious of sinful knowledge, is unable to understand the evil that Claggart personifies. Claggart, in turn, understands Billy (because the former has a knowledge of good and evil), and he is naturally depraved--to envy, then hate. "To be nothing more than innocent!" is his cry.[14] Billy and Claggart, then, are sired by the same necessity. Yet this same necessity made them to remain immutably incompatible.

The ship's crew, as a body, is not given much emphasis by Melville until the novel's later chapters. Until then, the various individuals are merely a latent force whose importance to the myth has not been realized--a nondescript body of men, without aim or distinction, whose presence aboard the man-of-war is accepted as a matter of course, and whose place there is the one outlined for them in antiquity and supervised in the present instance by the ship's captain. If Vere and Billy and Claggart are symbolic of values to be found in the community of men, the ship's crew are that community[15]--its blank statistical face, easily molded, for a time, by the trustees of order, but potentially explosive. Their importance, then, cannot easily be minimized, and Melville, in the final chapters, probes their effectiveness as a positive force.

The conflict in which the occupants of the microcosm Indomitable

[14]Ibid., p. 268.

[15]Note: At least one critic has taken note of the crew's importance to the novel's conflict: "A fourth character, apparently overlooked for many years, is the crew of the Indomitable, the mass of mankind, dominated easily, often brutally, by an authority they have learned to fear and respect." (Zink, p. 133).

were held prisoner began with Billy's impressment. Billy Budd originated in a state of justice (Rights of Man), where he was safely sequestered from the world of law. Examined closely, the contrast between the two orders is significant.

Billy, it will be remembered, was natural man in his primordial state of innocence before knowledge of the law, in the form of sinful experience, had sought him out. Aboard the Rights of Man, he had enjoyed a happy immunity from any necessity of compromise with total justice. If the microcosm figure is to apply, however, Billy cannot have entered the world of human reality until his impressment by the Indomitable; until that time, he lived in a world of the ideal, suspended from the real.

The realm of experience which awaited him was made from a different pattern. What Billy was to enter was the total of the human product, as it had settled, after centuries of experimentation, upon the man-of-war. Behind the Indomitable lay all the struggle of accomplishment; its mode of operation had been tested and canonized; the sanctity of its system was now protected by a captain who swore by that system and who capably enforced its implications.

The nature of the system itself is explicitly defined by Melville in Vere's debate with the lieutenants. "We proceed under the law of the Mutiny Act. In feature no child can resemble his father more than that Act resembles in spirit the thing from which it derives--War."[16] Man's ultimate loyalty, Vere says further, is to the king. "In His Majesty's

[16]Weaver, p. 305.

service--in this ship indeed--there are Englishmen forced to fight for the King against their will. Against their conscience, for aught we know. Though as their fellow creatures some of us may appreciate their position, yet as navy officers, what reck we of it? Still less recks the enemy. Our impressed men he would fain cut down in the same swath with our volunteers."[17]

Mankind, therefore, lived in a state of constant emergency, an emergency by nature not its own, since the state of war to which the common man was naturally introduced was yet not his own responsibility but the ubiquitous king's. Man's place was not to know--indeed, not to think conscientiously--but to obey. The law by which man was subjugated took its origin not from an institution of his own making but from the king's.

The disparity between natural law--the state of innocent idealism--and martial law is fully explained by Vere, theorist and apologist for order: "How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?--Does that state it aright? You sign sad assent. Well, I too feel that, the full force of that. It is nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King."[18]

The full extent of the law's jurisdiction is realized when Vere disavows his own responsibility in the case at hand. "When war is declared are we, the commissioned fighters, previously consulted? We

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., p. 304.

fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence."[19] Further, Billy's death, were it called for, would be the responsibility not of Vere and the officers but of martial law "operating through" them.

Something of the captain's defense savors less of altruism--recall his concern for the "true welfare of mankind"--than of the sort of explaining away which characterized the keepers of the old order. Within his stand exists an inherent contradiction. By his own implication, man's subservience to an irrational code of law was regrettable. Yet, in opposing the new liberalism, Vere accepted by default the proposition that the martial code was for man's own good. In short, he wished to avoid responsibility for the code's frailties as well as for the risk involved in implementing a change.

Melville used the lieutenants' arguments only as a foil for Vere. These minor officers were neither experienced in the ways of responsibility nor articulate in pleading clemency. By their weakness Vere was made to look strong: "But your scruples: do they move as in a dusk? Make them advance and declare themselves."[20] Here is an example of the efficient "common sense" which the captain admired.

Mitigation, said Vere, was impossible because impracticable. Under the circumstances devolving from the Nore Mutiny, any show of heart would have been misinterpreted by the crew as weakness. In the world of now, the martial code must be strenuously protected. If men

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., p. 303.

were senselessly sacrificed thereby, they had still the "Last Assizes," which, Vere believed, would provide final mercy.

For the crew such a doctrine was of vital importance. It meant that they were expected to accept their precarious position as fated--and fated, moreover, by a power to whom they could appeal only when appeal no longer mattered. Vere, in disavowing his own responsibility and pointing to the Last Assizes for final dispensation of justice, had linked the source of martial law with the source of moral law. In doing so, of course, he only continued the trope started by Melville in the novel's opening sentence: "The year 1797, the year of this narrative, belongs to a period which, as every thinker now feels, involved a crisis for Christendom. . . ." In subsequent chapters, Melville consistently draws a line between law (martial law, God's law) and man (Rights of Man, natural man), subtly arranging the issues in such a way as to challenge traditional Christian dogma.

No such theological intricacies would have been comprehended by Billy. He maintained his innocence to the last. Upon being accused, he reacted with a surprised confusion. He had nothing with which to defend himself from a depravity he could not understand. Claggart, at that moment, is depicted as a serpent: "The first mesmeric glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the hungry lurch of the torpedo-fish."[21]

Significantly, the scene recalls the Edenic account of man's temptation. Until this time, Billy had evinced no conception of evil,

[21]Ibid., p. 291.

even when warned by the Dansker. Claggart, whose origins were sinister, now appeared, in serpentine imagery, to confront the Handsome Sailor with a knowledge of evil. In contrast to the Adam and Eve story, Billy's situation called for promptness; he had not a lifetime in which to sorrow for a mistake: "'Speak, man!' said Captain Vere to the transfixed one. . . ."[22]

But Billy was twice handicapped. In addition to lacking a prior knowledge of good and evil, he lacked the physical ability to speak in a moment of stress. When he did express himself, in the only way left him by nature, he committed an act of implicit revolt. The issue, as presented by Melville, now stands thus: Under a condition of law, a man innocent of law stood accused of trespassing--yet without losing his natural goodness--by a guardian of the law who was, notwithstanding his position, naturally depraved. In defending himself, he was limited by his maker to an act which constituted a breach of law.

His fate lay now in the hands of a shaken Vere, whose loyalty to law was established earlier in this paper. After a few moments of shock, he recovered his sense of duty. Melville, in describing this recovery, reminds the reader of the story's religious significance: "But a true military officer is in one particular _like a true monk_. Not with more of self-abnegation will the latter keep his vows of monastic obedience than the former his vows of allegiance to martial duty."[23]

His immediate concern, in calling a drumhead court, was that

[22] _Ibid._, p. 291.

[23] _Ibid._, p. 297. (Italics added).

the crew, hearing of the incident, would mutiny. The court's responsibility was plain: "The essential right and wrong involved in the matter, the clearer that might be, so much the worse for the responsibility of a loyal sea commander inasmuch as he was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis."[24] Vere himself explicitly stated the case: "But for us here acting not as casuists or moralists, it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with."[25]

Billy, the reader is told, took his sentence in stride. His nature partook somewhat of the adolescent, in that, his innocence unimpaired, he did not fear death. He was happy: "For now and then in the gyved one's trance a serene light born of some wandering reminiscence or dream would diffuse itself over his face. . . ."[26] At the hanging scene, Billy demonstrated his complete acceptance of the sentence in his cry, "God bless Captain Vere!"[27]

Billy's own stand in the conflict of issues is made fairly clear. In striking Claggart, he was not intentionally striking at the law; indeed, he identified himself on the side of law, in making his defense: "Captain Vere tells the truth. It is just as Captain Vere says, but it is not as the master-at-arms said. I have eaten the King's bread and I am true to the King."[28] It was instead his innocence, for he was instinctively

[24]Ibid., p. 296.

[25]Ibid., p. 303.

[26]Ibid., p. 314.

[27]Ibid., p. 318.

[28]Ibid., p. 299.

striking against malignity. He seemed not to have realized that such an act should alienate him from "the King." Speaking further, he showed that he believed the captain to be offended, equally as himself, by Claggart's charge: "But he foully lied to my face and in the presence of my captain. . . ."[29]

When later he discovered the true consequence of his deed, he demonstrated his total faith in the captain's judgment--and whatever inscrutable authority stood behind it--by accepting the death sentence without complaint. In death, his body is represented by Melville as lacking the usual muscular spasm, leading to the purser's suggestive speculation that euthanasia was responsible. While the matter of euthanasia is left undecided, the mere raising of the question serves to demonstrate the abjectness of Billy's acceptance.

The details surrounding the execution are recorded in religious symbolism: "At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended, and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn."[30]

In this symbolism and the story's more salient mythic qualities, numerous critics have found what they believe to be an echo of the Christ story. Billy is, for them, a Christ-figure, and Melville, in his last novel, means to show his belated acceptance of the Christian doctrine of

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid., p. 319.

atonement. Briefly outlined, their theory calls for an extension of the sentiment behind Billy's last outcry, "God bless Captain Vere," to the novel's other principal characters, Vere and the crew, who returned the cry. By this interpretation, the religious imagery pervading the work is to be literally construed.

The first utterance of this still most popular of all interpretations was made by John Freeman, in 1926. Melville, in his last novel, says Freeman, "sets his brief, appealing tragedy for witness that evil is defeat and natural goodness invincible in the affections of man. In this . . . Herman Melville uttered his everlasting yea, and died before a soul had been allowed to hear him."[31]

Progressing from that first statement, other early critics, notably Raymond Weaver and Lewis Mumford, set the prevailing trend, which culminates in the illustrious interpretation of E. L. Grant Watson: "Melville is no longer a rebel. It should be noted that Billy Budd has not, even under the severest provocation, any element of rebellion in him; he is too free a soul to need a quality which is a virtue only in slaves."[32]

And there were others, including G. Giovannini,[33] who concentrates on events surrounding Billy's death; and James E. Miller, Jr., who has Billy ultimately ascending to heaven, "there to sit at the throne

[31]Herman Melville (New York, 1926), pp. 135, 136.

[32]"Melville's Testament of Acceptance," New England Quarterly, VI (June, 1933), 322.

[33]"The Hanging Scene in Melville's Billy Budd," Modern Language Notes, LXX (1955), 491-497.

of God."[34] One critic, in pursuing the orthodox Christian interpretation, comes to this remarkable conclusion: "At one stroke Melville has rendered all his previous work out of date. . . ."[35]

Among the many others to favor such an interpretation are Ray B. West, Jr.,[36] Walter Weber,[37] and Newton Arvin.

Opposing this view are certain critics who would reverse the religious symbolism to create irony. In this way they realign the issues of conflict and make possible a new realm of interpretations differing markedly from the general view outlined above. By this discovered device of irony, Joseph Schiffman, redefining the issues in non-Christian terms, extracts from the story an optimistic conclusion. He writes: "Actually, Melville's latest tale shows no radical change in his thought. Change lies in his style. Billy Budd is a tale of irony, penned by a writer who preferred allegory and satire to straight narrative and who, late in life, turned to irony for his final attack upon evil."[38] The irony, he said, is shown best in the crew's cry, "God bless Captain Vere," which, while voiced to Vere, was directed in sentiment to Billy. "Billy is sacrificed," said Schiffman, "but his ballad-singing mates seize upon this as the symbol of their lives."[39]

[34]"Billy Budd: The Catastrophe of Innocence," Modern Language Notes, LXXII (1958), 176.

[35]Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust (London, 1951), p. 258.

[36]"The Unity of Billy Budd," Hudson Review, V (1952), 120-128.

[37]"Some Characteristic Symbols in Herman Melville's Work," English Studies, XXX (1949), 217-224.

[38]"Melville's Final Stage, Irony: A Re-examination of Billy Budd Criticism," American Literature, XXII (May, 1950), 128.

[39]Ibid., p. 136.

On the other extreme of the irony scale are Carl E. Zink and Harry M. Campbell. The lesson Melville means to show, says Campbell, is that "in a universe like ours not even a Christ-like innocence is any protection against universal doom."[40] Campbell ignores the crew's place in the conflict, and concentrates upon the change undergone in the symbolism from its presentation in the short story ("Baby Budd, Sailor") to its presentation, later, in the novel. The symbolism, says Campbell, was modified in the novel so as to sharpen the irony and not obscure it.

Much of the difficulty involving Melville's symbolism derives from the fine ambiguity which surrounds the entire novel. Yet Billy Budd is tightly constructed, and if Melville has masked his tale in doubletalk--which almost assuredly he has--the critic must choose a starting point and follow his theory through to conclusion: he will find few places where the author has betrayed himself. The consequent importance of the ambiguity to interpretation--lest the reader think I have strayed--is this: with little inside the novel itself to inform him of Melville's allegorical intent, the critic tends to choose his meaning in advance, then to find its substantiation where he may. If such a procedure is less than ideal, it is nevertheless the only procedure which critics have found workable.

The split, then, between those critics who favor a Christian interpretation and those who favor the reverse has largely arisen from differing personal responses to a fundamental philosophic point--the

[40]"The Hanging Scene in Melville's Billy Budd Foretopman," Modern Language Notes, LXVI (1951), 379.

same point dramatized in Billy Budd. Thus the critic is forced by Melville to declare himself from the start. The procedure of this paper, for the next several paragraphs, will be to examine Billy as a Christ-figure, to note the similarities and dissimilarities of Melville's hero to Christ, and to establish--relying upon the law-justice framework supplied earlier in this paper--the foundation for an interpretation based upon Billy's points of divergence from the New Testament Christ.

Underlying any Christian interpretation of Billy Budd is the assumption that Billy's death, while unjust, worked for the ultimate good--that his sacrifice was a symbol of the sort of blood-shedding utilized in the French Revolution to work reform.[41] Or it was literally as Melville noncommittally phrased it: "During those years not the wisest could have foreseen that the outcome of all would be what to some thinkers apparently it has since turned out to be--a political advance along nearly the whole line for Europeans."[42] Even more--and this small point turns out, in the end, to be crucial--Billy, as Christ, was responsible, circuitously in process but directly in design, for that ultimate achievement of good. Just as Christ was the fulfilment of a grand design, so was Billy a symbol of the fulfilment of a design, whether applied to the political world or, by implication, to the fundamental moral framework.

[41]Note: Supporting that assumption, one critic, William E. Sedgwick, Jr., (Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1945, pp. 237-240) says that Vere's decision regarding Billy echoed Melville's own belief in the preservation of the "organic whole," in the ability to see beyond immediate circumstances to the future.

[42]Weaver, p. 228.

In comparing Billy Budd to the Bible story, the reader immediately notices a certain similarity. The gospel, to begin with, concerns itself with the timeless conflict between law and human inclination. According to traditional dogma man had been brought sinless into a universe which permitted sin. During his tenure on earth man was expected to make his own fortunes by exercising his will: the choice given him was obedience and life, or disobedience and death. At what was apparently his first confrontation with evil, he was tempted by the forces of evil to renounce his state of innocence. In doing so, for whatever motive, he came into a knowledge, which, in the gaining, doomed him ever after to a state of lawlessness and alienation from the Creator.

The spiritual history of man, from that point, is recorded as a perpetual struggle to regain lost innocence and thereby to bridge the gulf between himself and God. A grand design was conceived for the reconciliation. A Saviour was to emerge, in part human and in part divine, who was to experience the human dilemma without relinquishing His sinlessness, demonstrating in this way that man had not been forgotten. While never sinning experientally, this Christ-man would possess a divinely imputed knowledge of sin--in type, the accumulated sins of all generations--and would, to fulfill the demands of law, be sacrificed. All mankind chronologically before Him were to be saved in anticipation; those born after Him were saved already, through His act.

The whole plan was designed to refire man's imagination to things spiritual, to alter the drift away from closeness to the Creator. In short, as God's motive--it was explained--was love, the basis of

man's response was likewise to be love.[43] In a measure, Christ's sacrifice is represented as having substituted love for law, in that man, by loving the Creator and his fellowman, should find himself thereby circumventing the law's penalty, death.

The critic who interests himself in Billy Budd should, however, be mindful of another, differing view of the redemption story. Throughout the long history of man there have been those who insist that man has not received a fair chance from God--that he has been treated unjustly. The redemption story seen through these disaffected eyes represents a sharp contrast to the orthodox account. The principal points of divergence are obvious:

Man was brought into a world whose system he had no hand in designing. In fact, he was left ignorant of the prevailing moral order's pattern of design. In the Garden, his existence was, at best, precarious. Placed by God within easy reach was an emblem of the price man had to pay for both his ignorance and his innocence. When man, therefore, succumbed to his curiosity, he had been tempted not by the forces of evil but by God--who could sanction the seduction of innocence by depravity.

Furthermore, to arguments that man was expected to exercise his free will, the heretic would reply that, under the given terms, little room for choice was left man. In his state of innocence he had been

[43]Note: While the preceding sketch involving the "Old Covenant" may be considered in line with almost universally accepted dogma, the exact relation of love to law, in the "New Covenant," is still being argued. Consequently, I add love to the recipe, confident that its extraction would take nothing away from the recipe's general enjoyment--or from Melville's Billy Budd thesis.

expected--blindly or in love by faith--to obey; upon attaining to a knowledge of the reality of existence, he was given only the choice of life or death--hardly a subject upon which to exhaust the will power.

To offset the ancient arguments just presented, a theory was originated which admitted of God's responsibility in man's fall. According to this belief, man, in his state of innocence, was already alienated from God. The Creator, foreknowing all things, saw that man would fall, but He saw also that such a fall would be "fortunate," in that it would bring man eventually into a much closer relationship with divinity than would otherwise have been possible. Too, man's redemption from a state of lawlessness would serve to vindicate the God-ordained system of order by creating a bond of love between God and man. Man, then, would serve God out of a knowing appreciation rather than out of blind necessity.

From the disenchanted point of view, however, the additional power imputed to God by such a system reduced man's status to even more helpless puppetry. The attempted vindication of God, from this viewpoint, succeeded only in explaining more successfully the devious ways of divinity in hoodwinking man. Moreover, it added a new element of fatalism to man's existence: he had never, as he now learned, had a chance to resist the initial temptation.

An undercurrent of the Fortunate Fall slowly filtered into the disenchanted consciousness: what God foreknew He was responsible for. And if God, in His foreknowledge, could conceive of no plan more practicable than one involving man's unjust suffering, God must be, for all practical purposes, entrapped within the monster of His own making.

The step from orthodoxy to such an heretical conclusion was by no means as easy as this outline is brief and oversimplified.

Under the system presented above, the existence and authority of God were not denied, as they were by the atheist. The rebel, to the contrary, made the very relationship of God with man his point of revolt. Details of the Christ story itself might be accepted, divested of their significance--or, in fact, denied. While the rebel did not admit to Scriptural infallibility, he accepted the Biblical account of the Fall as mythically true--the only logical answer to man's condition in a world governed by a Supreme Being. Thus the rebel was left two choices, either of them heretical: he could accept the Christian story, without jeopardizing the basis of his revolt, or he could deny the story. Either way, he was safe. Perhaps the only real difference between acceptance and rejection lay in the implication involved in the latter that God had never seriously intended to save man.

Provided with an index similar to the one given above, the critic may then decide for himself into which pattern of thought Billy Budd fits as a Christ-figure.

Those critics--it will be recalled--who seek an orthodox Christian interpretation of the novel, cite numerous symbols for confirmation: Billy's cry, "God bless Captain Vere" and the crew's response; supernatural effects in the clouds, as Billy "ascended"; the appearance of the waterfowl at his commitment to the sea; and the crew's carrying with them of chips from the spar from which he was hanged, each chip valued as "a piece of the cross." Billy is obviously a carefully and consciously drawn Christ-figure of some kind. Melville must

have intended him so; the evidence mounted to support this conclusion is too voluminous to be ignored by any point of view.

Billy is, however, both more and less than this. In a sentence, he represents the human side of Christ, magnified and set into the perspective of a human situation, without Christ's recourse in divine aid. In itself, this shuffling of ingredients by Melville subtly affects the story's allegorical import, while scarcely touching its mythical framework.

Billy originated, to begin with, on a plane of innocence--but not exactly an Edenic innocence--uncolored by experience or disaffection. So called in a nomenclature born of revolt, Billy's emblematic home was the "Rights of Man." While his state of innocence was in no wise less complete than was Adam's, it is given--from without--an appellation implying self-consciousness. Already a conflict is presupposed.

Taken, though no choice of his own, from a world where justice enjoyed a benevolent rule, Billy was obliged to suffer the risk of exposure to death--the risk involved in experience--in a world long acclimated to law's significance. Order was the single verity aboard a man-of-war. No provision was made in this scheme of things for pure justice or the rights of man. "We fight at command," said Vere in defending his doctrine of expediency.[44] Billy's place was only to obey, blindly or in any other way that suited him, the naval code--arbiter of life and death. If he at any time misstepped, his crime was to be measured for the extent of its infringement upon the established order--

[44]Weaver, p. 304.

irrespective of personal motive--and the penalty promised to be harsh. Vere's apology is conspicuously lacking in reasons for the order's existence. He did not try to extenuate, himself a servant; despite the relative importance of his station, he could no more justify the law than could his crew. Yet, after a lifetime of living with the law, he could at last ruminate on its beneficence for mankind.

Billy's official station aboard ship accorded him no privileges which his mates did not enjoy. Unofficially, however, he assumed proportions approaching the heroic. The reptilian Claggart was fascinated by his innocence. Vere had an almost fatherly interest in him. The crew knew he was the Handsome Sailor; whatever worth he, as a person, possessed was appreciated only by the crew.

A foreshadowing of the Handsome Sailor's true importance for the crew is given by Melville early in the story: "In certain instances they would flank, or, like a bodyguard, quite surround, some superior figure of their own class, moving along with them like Aldebaran among the lesser lights of his constellation."[45] The crew's tributes, says Melville, were "spontaneous," appearing in the form of wonderment: "a pause and stare, and less frequent an exclamation. . . ."[46] In religious symbolism again inviting a Christian parallel, Melville adds, "The motley retinue showed that they took that sort of pride in the evoker of it [tribute] which the Assyrian priests doubtless showed for their

[45]Ibid., p. 229.

[46]Ibid., p. 230.

grand sculptured Bull when the faithful prostrated themselves."[47]

In rounding out the heroic depiction of his Handsome Sailor, Melville establishes the basis for the crew's adulation: "The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make. Indeed, except as toned by the former, the comeliness and power, always attractive in masculine conjunction, hardly could have drawn the sort of honest homage the Handsome Sailor in some examples received from his less gifted associates."[48] Then Billy Budd is identified as "something such" a personage.

Billy's story, as thus far outlined, offers some obvious parallels to the orthodox Christ story: the general origins of both Christ and Billy, their reputations among the authorities and the common people.

Upon closer examination, as previously submitted, certain discrepancies appear, in the areas that have the greater part of the allegorical significance. While Christ originated in a mysterious fusion of divinity and humanity--which theologians do not pretend to understand--Billy began as a human being--primordial humanity, in its state of pre-experience.

Billy entered the same conflict as did Christ. But while the latter had been sent by divinity upon a specific mission for a vastly consequential purpose, Billy was placed in the realm of experience without choice or design, carrying a banner emblazoned, the Rights of Man. He was, therefore, a representative of humanity, with no thought of

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid., p. 231.

divinity--with, indeed, no knowledge of any quarrel between man and God. Further, Billy was a "barbarian," ignorant even, in his innocence, of religion's God.

The discrepancy between Christ's experience and Billy's becomes more noteworthy as Billy approaches his fatal clash with law. Christ, armed with a transcendant understanding of the whole divine plan, could feel--in another of the theological mysteries--despite His sinlessness the weight of man's alienation from law and God. The acuteness of His agony is recorded in the gospel story of Gethsemane.

What about Billy? Going to his death, he put implicit trust in the justice of his sentence. The full extent of his serenity is underlined when, after a short meeting, following the trial, between Billy and Vere, Melville remarks that "the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation. . . ."[49] At a moment the full anguish of which even the law's trustee could appreciate, Billy remained calm.

To illustrate further the variance of Billy Budd's alignment of issues from the gospel's, a scene is inserted in which the chaplain visits Billy to constrain him toward Christianity: "If in vain the good chaplain sought to impress the young barbarian with ideas of death akin to those conveyed in the skull, dial, and crossbones on old tombstones, equally futile to all appearance were his efforts to bring home to him the thought of salvation and a Saviour."[50] Billy listened, the reader is told, with a

[49]Ibid., p. 310.

[50]Ibid., p. 316.

politeness reserved by mariners of his class for any "discourse abstract" out of the usual fare of "the workaday world."

The passage just cited contains a wealth of allegorical meaning. While Billy's un-Christian approach to a conflict in which Christianity seemed vitally implicated is explicitly stated, his indifferent attitude is shown to be representative of the general class to which he belonged. Just as Billy is identified with his fellow crewmen, so they are identified with him. And the lofty concept of "salvation and a Saviour" is all but equated with a morbid, decayed concept of death totally out of spirit with theoretical Christianity. By linking the two incongruously whose sympathies had Melville in mind but the crew's?

Religious symbolism stops for a time with the story's dramatic climax at the end of Chapter 26. Billy has been hanged, thus delivering his last tribute to law. With a final flourish of visual imagery, the narrator withdraws into a "digression." From this point the mood abruptly changes, from comparatively explicit statement--still with its undercurrent--to clouded insinuation and conjecture. To the reader, the effect is as if the distance between the ship and himself had been doubled.

The story, however, is far from complete. While the cause-effect cycle most important to plot--Billy's transgression and death--has run its course, there yet remains an underlying cycle of even more profound interpretive significance: the effect which any notable action has upon its makers and participants. In short, the reader is bidden to step into the larger world of consequence, where time and event vie with the past in shaping men's lives. The meaning of Billy Budd, then, ends not with Billy's death but with the last line of the closing ballad,

just as--for the benefit of a Christian interpretation--the gospel did not end with Christ's crucifixion but, in fact, began there.

The story's conflict, as broadly outlined in allusions to the French Revolution, the Old World versus the New, the conflict of law and justice--was left incomplete at Billy's execution. The rights of man, through their personification in Billy, were crushed beneath the heel of indomitable law as they had been crushed for centuries preceding. Vere, in supervising the action, played his appointed role as had scores of his spiritual forebearers. Nothing, in fact, had changed at Billy's death. Had the novel's meaning ended there, Melville could justifiably be regarded as having written a story of metaphysical resignation, but scarcely more.

Indeed, it is this very coyness of Melville's, at such a dramatic point in the novel's action, which has led certain critics--not at all won over by the Christly allusions--to regard the religious symbolism as ironic,[51] its intent not affirmative but negative and pessimistic.

But the conflict is continued into a half-light world of projection by a new set of representatives of the rights of man--the crewmen themselves. The hitherto unbroken continuity of event following event has stopped, and the reader is obliged to glean his additional information from broken snatches ostensibly arranged at random. The stage upon which the remainder of the play is enacted becomes considerably expanded. Consequences, in other words, of Billy's execution extend beyond the immediate instance to other ships, to wherever the story is

[51]See pp. 19, 20.

carried in the memories of its principals.

This extension also inaugurates a new phase of the novel's myth-structure. Up to this point the reader has been told the facts of Billy's life. Put otherwise--if a Christ-parallel is to this extent applicable--the reader has been given the "ministry" of Billy, his "acts," so to speak. After Billy's death, a transformation takes place among the crewmen, the same sort of change which befell the New Testament chroniclers after Christ's departure: now the acts of the mythic hero are suffused with an aura of spirituality, and he is remembered in terms of the values for which he, wittingly or unwittingly, stood. In the years immediately following Christ's ascension, a spate of logia developed, in this case, a probably conscious effort toward the recording or development of dogma. Billy's "disciples" developed no dogma; yet they had imprinted upon their minds a sort of logia for them quite adequate.

The myth-structure has now concluded with the fact of Billy, and proceeds to relate his effect upon the world he left. This world includes not only Billy's "disciples," the crew, but those who condemned him. In short, Billy's story--in the minds of the novel's characters now a potential social force--is to be committed to history-in-process, subject to that leveling and elevating which every consequential human story undergoes in the telling.

A significant illustration of the change is the substitution of primitive, superstitious effect for religious. Budd, it will be remembered, was early established as a "barbarian" to whom religion had no meaning. At his death the crewmen showed their kinship to Billy (the "barbarian")

by responding, not religiously but barbarically, to details in the natural world about them.[52] The sea fowl, for instance. The intrusion of those birds could have signified nothing to religiously oriented men, who would instead have responded to imagery similar to that employed by the narrator when earlier he spoke rapturously of "the fleece of the Lamb of God." For this crew, however, the sea fowl did have meaning--a meaning necessarily superstitious.

Part of the response attributable to the crew is derived from the imagery chosen by Melville to color the transpiring events. The language used by the author to describe those acute moments following Billy's commitment to the sea creates a mood of buzzing apprehension. The mood begins in silence, then swells:

> The silence at the moment of execution, and for a moment or two continuing thereafter (but emphasized by the regular wash of the sea against the hull, or the flutter of a sail caused by the helms-man's eyes being tempted astray), this emphasized silence was gradually disturbed by a sound not easily to be here verbally rendered. Whoever has heard the freshet-wave of a torrent suddenly swelled by pouring showers in tropical mountains, showers not shared by the plain; whoever has heard the first muffled murmur of its sloping advance through precipitous woods, may form some conception of the sound now heard. The seeming remoteness of its source was because of its murmurous indistinctness, since it came from close by, even from the men massed on the ship's open deck.[53]

This mood of inarticulate protest is imbued with a high tension which does not dissipate in the novel's remaining pages. Instead, as the event passes further from them, the crew sublimate their protest

[52]Note: This response was, of course, but an aspect of their response to Billy, since without his death the detail would have lacked significance.

[53]Weaver, p. 321.

into a form more easily adaptable to their position, as will shortly be pointed out.

Billy, while he lived, had little practical effect upon the balance of order aboard a man-of-war. But he did create a bond of sympathy with the crewmen which, at his death, in some measure activated them to a real confrontation with the law. At this point in the story, then, is established the crew's assumption of the issue emblematized by Billy while he lived. Having recognized in him something of potential value to their hitherto valueless lives, they were stung, at his death, from the dumb stupor which had stultified them and their class since its initial victimization.

Now the lines of conflict became more firmly divided. With Billy gone, no one remained to plead the case for which he had passively stood. Against them were aligned the considerable forces of an entrenched system which still felt itself capable of burying the new liberalism.

Melville carried his symbolization of the conflict into a passage describing the last days of Captain Vere. Upon its return passage, the Indomitable was engaged by a French warship, the Atheiste; once again the old order was meeting the new, with the respective loyalties loudly proclaimed in the ships' names. In this engagement Vere was mortally wounded--"by a musket-ball from a port-hole of the enemy's main cabin."[54] While the particular mode of Vere's demise probably constitutes little more than an author's toying with his symbols, it does,

[54]Ibid., p. 325. (Italics added)

nevertheless, offers a reprisal for Vere's responsibility in the death of Billy Budd. It also shows, despite the captain's deathbed impenitence, that Melville had not forgotten his issues at this stage in the novel.

Even more highly significant to the conflict's continuation is a report which appeared in "an authorized weekly publication"[55] purporting to give the details of Billy's execution. For those critics who have found in the novel a technique of deliberate ironical undertone, this account is a bonanza. For the irony here is so obvious and masterful it cannot be denied. It deserves particular attention.

The innocent Billy with whom the reader has become familiar is here characterized as an outlaw representative of the new world and new ideas: "one of those aliens adopting English cognomen whom the present necessities of the Service have caused to be admitted into it in considerable numbers."[56]

In a complete reversal of what the reader knows is true, Billy's character is assigned to the category of "extreme depravity," while Claggart is described as "respectable and discreet," the sort of man--note the irony--upon whom "the efficiency of His Majesty's navy so largely depends."[57]

What is perhaps the crowning irony is reserved to the last: "The criminal paid the penalty of his crime. The promptitude of the punishment has proved salutary. Nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., p. 326.

[57] Ibid.

the H. M. S. Indomitable."[58]

From the account just outlined, the reader may extract Melville's issues in their proper alignment. The naval chronicle's account comprised the only notice paid to Billy by the forces of law in their social perspective. After the clamor had died away, even after Vere's few moments of honest soul-searching, all that remained for Billy in the official record of human events was a malignment which not only distorted his character but belied the true stature of the conflict in which he was a participant. This account was sanctioned by the same authority to which Vere swore allegiance. But Vere, in his presentation of the ordered point of view, was perceptive and sensitive to a degree far beyond the reach of his class. For by the time Billy's story reached the stage of history, recorded for consumption of the masses, the innocent emblem of mankind had been scandalized.

Having examined Billy as a Christ-figure and having established the crew's importance in the moral conflict, this paper will now attempt a final structuring of issues, and in the end will present Melville's consequent solution of man's struggle to achieve justice.

In marshalling his forces for a novelist's depiction of the eternal conflict between law and justice, Melville enclosed his microcosm within iron walls. Superficially, the critic might assume that law, which comprised the ultimate limit of human action, also worked to circumscribe the action of each individual character. Claggart was represented by Melville as innately depraved; Billy Budd was shown to

[58] Ibid.

be innately innocent. From the Calvinistic point of view--of which Melville was, no doubt, ever mindful--such a predestination is acceptable. For the purposes of artistic presentation, however, this close an application of Calvinistic doctrine, while admissable, was unnecessary. Recognizing that in a world such as ours evil and good did in fact exist and do battle, the novelist needed only to represent them in character. In this way, Claggart was the embodiment of pure evil, while Billy represented man's impulse toward goodness and innocence; the design to completeness of one or the other was irrelevant.

In the larger sense, law was simply the program fed into the machinery of our world, limiting and defining all things, including man. As such, viewed only in its potential, it comprised no threat to man in his primordial state of innocence. But in its state of accomplishment--as Adam and Billy were painfully to discover--law carried only negative value. Curiosity brought on the original Fall; Adam and Eve gained a knowledge of the law by receiving its penalty. Billy, on the other hand, possessed no such curiosity, since he had already dimly perceived in the flogging of his mates what law meant. He was carefully obedient, until law sought him out and destroyed him.

Therein lies the injustice about which Billy Budd revolves. Claggart, represented by custodians of the law as the kind of man upon whom "the efficiency of His Majesty's navy so largely depends," had forcibly demanded Billy's innocence. By making Claggart the first of the ship's responsible men to condemn Billy, Melville did not, however, mean to suggest that the martial code was essentially evil. Rather, by juxtaposing Claggart's act with Vere's apology for the maintenance of

order, he showed the law's cruel indifference to morality.

An earlier suggestion that Melville--despite the myth's superficial resemblance to the Christ story--drew his metaphysical lines across the face of religion in such a way as to alter subtly its outlook now becomes more readily explainable. The awesome thing which doomed Billy had an existence of its own--apart from the friendly, familiar concept of law perpetrated by religion. And so marked is the distinction made by Melville between the law of religion and the law represented in Billy Budd that it cannot be less than the product of a deliberate intent by the author to rewrite the story of man's relationship with God.

Witness: Vere, as the sort of man who comforts himself with a mystical religious resignation, was forced into admitting that his world allowed of no safe justice. The responsibility for justice he deferred to a God who, in the beginning, had created the world as permitting injustice.

Witness: In one of his rare moments of plain talk, Melville defines the role of the ship's chaplain: "Why then is he there? Because he indirectly subserves the purpose attested by the cannon; because, too, he lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but force."[59] Scarcely could Melville have been more explicit. Here is defined the margin between religion and practical reality--the margin which Melville sought to exploit in Billy Budd. For the novel's purpose, the chaplain, the vicar of God on

[59]Ibid., p. 317.

earth, was swallowed no less than Vere or Billy by law.

Having failed to impress Billy with the "thought of salvation and a Saviour," this chaplain did something which the reader will recognize is significant. Feeling that "innocence was even a better thing than religion wherewith to go to judgment,[60] he reluctantly withdrew; but in his emotion not without performing an act strange enough in an Englishman, and under the circumstances yet more so in any regular priest. Stooping over, he kissed on the fair cheek his fellow man, a felon in martial law, one who, though in the confines of death, he felt he could never convert to a dogma; nor for all that he did fear for his future."[61]

The priest's mission is at once recognized as sterile. The concept of Christianity which he tried to convey to Billy involved a view of death totally out of touch with Billy's sympathies or needs. Finally, dropping his guise, the chaplain responded to Billy as a fellow man, and there--it is implied--he struck sympathy. A bond of genuine brotherhood was created, for the first time in the novel, between a keeper of the law and a representative of common man. The final importance of his act is underlined in his candid acknowledgment that Billy, despite his barbaric nature, would not suffer eternally. For a man in the chaplain's position such candor was extreme.

Despite this irregularity on the part of the chaplain, law's injustice persisted. The conflict was in no measure over, even if Melville

[60]Note that the contraries here are not religion versus Christianity's ideal righteousness, but religion versus innocence.

[61]Weaver, p. 316. (Italics added).

had prefigured his solution of it. The old order yet remained, safe in its benediction by orthodox morality, to squelch the rights of man. Liberal theorists continued to goad the sensibilities of the common man to throw off his yoke.

Quite often, where justice was invoked, social and moral anarchy was the only noticeable result. With the revolution--it seemed to conservative forces--much was denied and little affirmed. But Melville placed his narrative within the period of anarchy probably better to serve his purpose. At that time, to be a revolutionary was not easy; to believe in the new order required considerable foresight. While most of Billy Budd's debate--on the level of full articulation--offers the orthodox point of view, beneath the surface symbolism ever lurks the implication that a longer perspective is required for the solution of man's problem.

Melville, however, does not let the issue die there. Having conceded that the Great Mutiny, in the end, did effect important reforms, he deplores the sacrifice of human life necessary for achieving true justice. While Billy's death served to stimulate man's cause, why should one man have to die that other men might have freedom? It is to this question that Melville directed the bitterness of his altered Christ-parable.

Though Christ had died, injustice had persisted, making His sacrifice--for Melville's purpose--meaningless.[62] Law was still the

[62]Note: Though Christ had died, in fact, not to give humanity justice but to give humanity more mercy, nothing--for Melville's purpose--is thereby changed. For, if grace abounded, so did injustice. It was not grace which was wanted, but the rectification of the original moral pattern which tempted man to sin, then condemned him for it, having left him no choice but submission or defiance, and offering him no exit but life under reprehensible terms or death.

first fact of man's existence. After Christ, it had led to the establishment of an order which had, as if deliberately, stifled man's aspirations. Billy's death, then, in no significant way symbolized Christ's. So far as the crew were concerned, Billy's death was but the most affecting dramatization of what they had in anguish long since learned: that they mattered as human beings only to themselves, and that if they were ever to be freed of their chains they must themselves assert their right to be free.

Expendable for the forces of law, what then, affirmatively, was Billy? Everything he implied went for the benefit of his fellows. For them, the men with whom he had worked and with whom he had shared the risk of death, he was a savior--not despite his sacrifice to the law but because of it. In his status in the universe he was of their stock--this they recognized first of all. But, more than this, he was one of those strange mutations--though a mutation carefully constructed by Melville--to whom men will always devote a special portion of their affections. He was quintessentially human, more complete than his fellows in those qualities composing human idealism. They sensed in him something of profound value, and, smarting under their loss at his death, they formed of his life a myth: "The spar from which the foretopman was suspended was for some few years kept trace of by the bluejackets. Then knowledge followed it from ship to deck-yard to ship, still pursuing it even when at last reduced to a mere deck-yard boom. To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross.[63] . . . They recalled

[63]Note: The piece of spar carried by the crew was to them "as a piece of the Cross" would have been to a Christian. This passage does not suggest that the chip had Christian significance. Melville is here, as elsewhere, merely representing an action in terms of a familiar index of myth; his choice of the Christ story was particularly apt, since it was that story which he meant to attack.

the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor, that face never deformed by a sneer or subtler vile freak of the heart within! This impression of him was doubtless deepened by the fact that he was gone, and in a measure mysteriously gone."[64]

What was Billy for Melville, his creator? By depicting his Handsome Sailor in the manner explained in this paper, Melville did more than show contempt for the orthodox plan of redemption. He offered his view albeit hesitantly, almost weakly, of the way man was to achieve justice in the world of now. Debased--and, to all reasonable appearances, abandoned--by an unjust God, and lost to a knowledge of salvation, man tends to make his own heroes. Just such a hero was Billy Budd depicted to be. In his artless purity, he offered to his mates a glowing reminder of their basic nobility. Having once been awakened from their stupor, they could now, hopefully, go on, bound in sympathy and love, to create a genuine brotherhood of man, capable at least of achieving good under terms in keeping with human dignity.

If Melville were serious about his myth, the reader would not be amiss in calling it the new gospel; it does have all the earmarks of a carefully thought out, if incomplete, rule for living. On the other hand, it is one of the principal facts of Billy Budd criticism that no single interpretation has succeeded in satisfying the prejudice of every other critic. Melville, an acknowledged master at covering his tracks, did not stumble with this his final work. Whether doctrine or, at the other extreme, mere artistic depiction of life and the intestine struggle of

[64]Weaver, p. 327.

mankind with itself, the story of Billy Budd is poignantly, sympathetically told. And the reader cannot mistake in its conclusion the integrity of a writer long accustomed to wrestling with the problem of man in the universe.

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