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«BILLY BUDD, SAILOR»: AN AFFIRMATION OF THE TRANSFORMING AND SYNTHESIZING POWER OF MAN'S MYTHO-POETIC IMAGINATION

Melville's 1849-50 and 1856-57 voyages to Europe and the Near East made both immediate and lasting impressions on him. His works after 1849 illustrate how Melville used the various people, landscape features, historical landmarks and works of art which he observed during his travels to enrich his settings, plots and characters and to create complex patterns of themes, images and symbols. His works also reveal the function of European aesthetic principles in the formation of Melville's own theory and practice. This paper focuses on Melville's last work, *Billy Budd*.[1] A detailed analysis of certain aspects of the novella shows how Melville uses his 1849 and 1856 journal entries to complete the Handsome Sailor myth, which he started creating in his early works, and how this myth indicates Melville's return to the sublime hero and the picturesque aesthetic at the end of his life. The textual analysis also shows Melville's growing faith in man's mythopoetic imagination, in the value of the artist's role in society, and in the eternality of art.

We start our close reading by observing Melville's use of his journal entries to create certain major characters in *Billy Budd*. Two of these entries which primarily contribute to characterization are Melville's description of the Roman Emperor Tiberius' bust (Hall of Emperors, Capitol Museum, Rome), and Melville's visit to Greenwich Hospital on November 21, 1849. Tiberius' *1856 Journal* description seems to inform Claggart's portrait in *Billy Budd*: «Museum of Capitol. Hall of Emperors. 'That Tiberius? he dont [sic] look so bad at all' —It was he. A look of sickly evil,— intellect without manliness & sadness without goodness. Great brain overrefinements. Solitude».[2] The

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1. «Billy Budd, Sailor», *Great Short Works of Herman Melville* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). The novella will be hereafter cited as *Billy Budd*. Further references to it appear in the text.

2. Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant, October 11,*

description of Tiberius' bust is perhaps the basis of the general comments in *Billy Budd* about evil-natured men who appear sane and employ reason to serve a purpose «which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane...». This madness is secretive. Such is Claggart, too, «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'» (p. 458). The action of the story further enlarges Claggart's «sickly evil», his lack of manliness, his sadness and his intellectuality.

The focus on the disparity between Claggart's appearance and the evil reality hidden underneath is thematically similar to the description of Tiberius' overt attractiveness and covert evil in the *1856 Journal* and to Melville's discussion of Tiberius' bust in his lecture «Statues in Rome». In this lecture Melville points out how the sculptor managed to convey Tiberius' «sinister features», and to «develop the monster portrayed by the historian. For Tiberius was melancholy without pity, and sensitive without affection. He was, perhaps, the most wicked of men».[3] Melville's interest in Tiberius was revealed in his early work as well, before he even travelled to Italy and saw the bust. As Sweeney says:

> for Melville, Tiberius was a mythic character whose biography was prominently stored and easily accessible in Melville's warehousemind in the section housing the shapes of depravity. Significant too regarding the continuation and development of Melville's historical myth-making is that almost a decade after *Redburn* he thought of Tiberius —and not of Satan, Cain, Prometheus, Oedipus, Orestes, or even Iago— as the epitome of evil.[4]

So Tiberius is the model for Jackson, he is mentioned as the epitome of depravity in Melville's «Statues in Rome», and he finally in-

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1856 - May 6, 1857, ed. Howard C. Horsford (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955), p. 191; this work will be hereafter cited as *1856 Journal*.

3. Merton Sealts, *Melville as Lecturer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), p. 135.

4. Gerard M. Sweeney, *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1975), p. 142.

forms the portrait of Claggart in *Billy Budd*.[5]

A negro Melville met at Greenwich Hospital, on the other hand, becomes the model for a negro the narrator in *Billy Budd* meets «on the terrace at Greenwich» (p. 449);[6] the negro is an old pensioner in a cocked hat, who has fought at Trafalgar; he gives the narrator information about that sea-battle and its background, such as the mutinies preceding the battle, the quality of crews, the practice of impressment in England, etc. Thus, Melville's *1849 Journal* entry provides part of the historical framework within which he places the action of the story and introduces his private hero, Lord Nelson, whom he greatly admired and often mentioned in his previous works as an example of the ideal leader and the epitomy of a heroic past.[7] In *Billy Budd* Nelson serves as a foil to Vere and to certain naval values and practices Vere represents. The narrator praises Nelson's fearlessness, his self-sacrificing attitude, his spontaneity and his sense of ritual and drama:

> Personal prudence, even when dictated by quite other than selfish considerations, surely is no special virtue in a military man; while an excessive love of glory, impassioning a less burning impulse, the honest sense of duty, is the first. If the name Wellington is not so much of a trumpet to the blood as the simpler name Nelson, the reason for this may perhaps be inferred from the above. Alfred in his funeral ode on the victor of Waterloo ventures not to call him the greatest soldier of all time, though in the same ode he invokes Nelson as «the greatest sailor since our world began».
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> At Trafalgar Nelson on the brink of opening the fight

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5. Henry Pommer, *Milton and Melville* (New York: Cooper Square Publ., 1970), pp. 87-90, analyses Claggart's connection with Milton's Satan.

6. Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent, 1849-1850*, ed. Eleanor Melville Metcalf (London: Cohen and West, 1949), p. 37. This work will be referred to as *1849 Journal* in the text. The entry about the negro Melville met on November 21, 1849 is: «The negro. —Hat off!— Hat on!».

7. References to Nelson and his heroic deeds, to his ships the *Victory* and the *Temeraire*, or to his monuments in England can be found in: *Moby Dick*, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 43, *The Battle-Pieces of Herman Melville*, ed. Hennig Cohen (New York: Yoseloff, 1963), pp. 59-60, 248, *1849 Journal*, pp. 14, 37-38, 45, 73, 124, 153-54, 259, and *1856 Journal*, p. 61.

> sat down and wrote his last brief will and testament. If under the presentiment of the most magnificent of all victories to be crowned by his own glorious death, a sort of priestly motive led him to dress his person in the jewelled vouchers of his own shining deeds; if thus to have adorned himself for the altar and the sacrifice were indeed vainglory, then affectation and fustian is each more heroic line in the great epics and dramas, since in such lines the poet but embodies in verse those exaltations of sentiment that a nature like Nelson, the opportunity being given, vitalizes into acts (pp. 442-43).

Even though the narrator is not completely reliable and some of his praise seems inflated, we can still feel Melville's own admiration of Nelson concealed under the narrator's comments as well as Melville's sceptical attitude towards the various men of prudence, like Vere. Nelson did not excel in battle only. He also showed outstanding leadership qualities, when impressment and unjust practices of naval discipline caused the Nore and other mutinies. Then Nelson was appointed to restore order among the crews, «not indeed to terrorize the crew into base subjection, but to win them, by force of his mere presence and heroic personality, back to an allegiance if not as enthusiastic as his own yet as true» (pp. 443-44). By referring to the Nore and other mutinies, to Nelson's character and his victory at Trafalgar, Melville creates the historical background against which the action of the novella takes place. Moreover, he sets certain standards of naval virtue and discipline against which he then tests the actions of his major characters and thus reveals their personalities.

Setting his story at a time following the Nore Mutiny Melville creates an atmosphere of military necessity and justifies, to some extent, Vere's fear of mutiny on his own ship, his cautiousness and strict disciplinary measures. A closer reading of Vere's description, however, proves that Melville often undermines the narrator's favorable comments about Vere and his qualities as a captain. Captain Vere is a bachelor, and Melville's treatment of bachelors in his previous works, such as the narrator in «Bartleby», Captain Delano in «Benito Cereno», or the bachelors in «The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids», has not been particularly flattering. Their common characteristics are their inability to penetrate the masks of appea-

rances and to perceive the ambiguities of experience, their complacency, support of the status quo and prudence. Nor has Melville's previous treatment of sea-captains been favorable either, and Vere seems to share some of their negative characteristics, such as arbitrariness, secrecy, isolation from officers and crew, and willingness to sacrifice moral principles for the sake of expediency.

Moreover, Vere has «little appreciation of mere humor», he is more of a civilian rather than a sailor, and he is always pedantic and grave, even while he is on shore. Besides, Vere's reading taste shows that, instead of trying to broaden his intellectual horizons by reading, he feels more comfortable with books which reassure him of his conservative socio-political views. He shows no interest in literature; he himself is unimaginative and he suppresses any temporary dreaminess of mood or emotion that he feels. He has never tolerated «an infraction of discipline as an officer», which shows his inflexibility and adherence to forms. It is not surprising, therefore, that Vere feels confused and threatened when he is confronted with the intellectual and moral ambiguities of Claggart's and Billy's case. Vere's lack of imagination and his fear of the irrational in himself, Billy and the crew, make him follow the letter of the Mutiny Act, summon the court hastily and manipulate the whole procedure in such a way that Billy's death sentence becomes inevitable. When the other members of the court try to discuss the moral, in addition to the military aspects of Billy's action, and they propose to refer the case to the Admiral, Vere says:

> But the exceptional in the matter moves the hearts within you. Even so too is mine moved. But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool. Ashore in a criminal case, will an upright judge allow himself off the bench to be waylaid by some tender Kinswoman of the accused seeking to touch him with her tearful plea? Well, the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out (p. 486).

The reader who believes that in the person of Vere Melville creates the ideal leader should remember that Melville himself consistently favored the heart and not the head.[8] In all his works which drama-

8. «I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool

tize the conflict between the head and the heart, the protagonists who suppress their hearts for the sake of their intellectual quests end up destroying not only themselves but also the people around them. In «L'Envoi», the concluding poem in *Timoleon*, the speaker admits the inevitable failure of quests for absolute truths and affirms the value of love. The importance of love is further stressed in Melville's last poetry collection *Weeds and Wildings*. Moreover, *Billy Budd* is dedicated to Jack Chase, «that great heart» (p. 429), whom Melville immortalized in his early novel *White Jacket*, too. Lord Nelson and Billy are also popular among the sailors for their magnanimity and their sacrificial heroism. When we see Vere against all this, it is very difficult for us to accept that he is the «administrator as the hero» or the «proper leader» that Melville creates in his last work, or the tragic hero in *Billy Budd* —this is how Stern and Chase see Vere respectively.[9]

To prevent any mutinous reactions of the crew after Billy's execution Vere orders the drums to beat and summon the men back to their duties. He justifies his extra disciplinary measures as follows: «'With mankind', he would say, 'forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood'» (p. 501). Dew asserts that Vere might mesmerize ordinary men through forms, prudently imposing upon them discipline to save them from chaos;[10] the events of the story, however, question the lasting power of Vere's discipline. In case one argues that the special conditions created after the Great Mutiny determine Vere's strict adherence to naval forms, the novella itself provides the reader with a different pattern of behavior, that of Nelson. Nelson managed first to subdue the rebellious

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with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch». This passage is from Melville's June 1, 1851 letter to Hawthorne contained in *The Letters of Herman Melville*, eds Merrell Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), p. 129.

9. Milton Stern, *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957), pp. 234, 239; Richard Chase, *Herman Melville* (New York: McMillan, 1949), p. 277.

10. Marjorie Dew, «The Prudent Captain Vere», *Studies in the Minor and Later Works of Melville*, ed. Raymona E. Hull (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1970), p. 84.

crews, after the Nore Munity, and then to lead them to Victory at Nile and Trafalgar through his own enthusiasm, powerful personality, magnanimity, imagination, spontaneity and his skill as a captain and leader; even Jack Chase and Billy Budd are able to keep the sailors under order and to impose peace through their magnetic personalities. When compared with the captains depicted in Melville's previous works, Vere appears more humanitarian and sympathetic. When contrasted to Nelson as a leader, however, he appears defective. Longenecker's argument about Vere is more valid than Dew's:

> Echoing the poeting conception of truth in the Romantic tradition, Melville once wrote to Hawthorne that «what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist on the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion». This granting of ontological status to a contingent condition is Vere's fatal mistake. Vere's typological identification with Orpheus as a lawmaker, not as an artist, is in the largest sense a failure of imagination.[11]

In addition to Vere's limitations pointed out by Longenecker, we should also notice his inability to see that change is an inevitable part of experience, and that inflexible and static forms cannot freeze experience. By reading only books which justify his own established values or the status quo, and by taking measures which help to perpetuate this statusquo, Vere cannot stop change, but can only deceive himself that he can stop it. His death during a battle against the *Atheist*, a ship representing the French Revolution, that is the violent overthrow of the established order and law in France, is the ironic proof of Vere's mistake; for Vere's static military forms cannot contain and control the constant flux of experience, and they are, therefore, destroyed by it. Besides, the scene in which military music and religious rites «subserving the discipline and purpose of war» are used to impose order on the crew, «suggests the incongruity of religion and war. But it also provides, not a further illustration of, but rather an ironic contrast to the emblem of Orpheus taming the beasts of the

11. Marlene Longenecker, «Captain Vere and the Form of Truth», *Studies in Short Fiction*, 14, No. 4 (Fall 1977), 339.

wood with his lyre».[12] For society in *Billy Budd* uses Orpheus' taming power not to bring peace to the world but to tame the beast in each man so that it (society) can later manipulate the tamed man and use him as a tool in its own enterprises of chaos, that is war. In a world-at-war, love, peace and beauty are inevitably destroyed—their embodiments, such as Christ and Billy are destroyed, too.

In addition to being a foil to Vere, Nelson and his oaken ship that Melville saw at Portsmouth, serve as symbols of the superior moral and aesthetic quality of the past —the superiority of the past is a recurrent theme in Melville's works. The narrator, like Melville himself, laments the development of technology and science, which, among other things, have destroyed the possibility of heroism and myth in warfare by reducing men to machines or operators of machines. Melville, the artist, who has sought means of transcending death through art, heroism or other personal qualities, emphasizes the superiority of the *Victory*, Nelson's oaken ship, over the modern ironclads:

> Nevertheless, to anybody who can hold the Present at its worth without being inappreciative of the Past, it may be forgiven, if to such an one the solitary old hulk at Portsmouth, Nelson's *Victory*, seems to float there, not alone as the decaying monument of a fame incorruptible, but also as a poetic reproach, softened by its picturesqueness, to the *Monitors* and yet mightier hulls of the European ironclads. And this not altogether because such craft are unsightly, unavoidably lacking the symmetry and grand lines of the old battleships, but equally for other reasons (pp. 441-42).

The symmetry of form and grand lines of the old battleships, like the classical sculpture and architecture that Melville admired in Europe, reflect a harmony between the real and the ideal as well as between the emotional, aesthetic, moral and spiritual concerns of the artist-designer and his society. In contrast to the *Victories*, the modern *Monitors* betray an increasing emphasis on the material, useful and practical aspects of life at the expense of the spiritual, moral and aesthetic ones. This results in the dissociation of individual sensibility and the

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12. Ralph Willett, «Nelson and Vere: Hero and Victim in *Billy Budd, Sailor*», *PMLA*, 82, No. 5 (October 1967), 376.

alienation of the artist from society. Stessel points out that Melville lamented not the obsolescence of the heart-of-oak in *Battle-Pieces*, *John Marr* and *Billy Budd*, but of the man-of-war in a technological age, because he saw the world of machines as the world of his own failure.[13] Stessel's observation is valid, but to see Melville's admiration for a heroic past only on the autobiographical level limits Melvilles' scope considerably.

With his conservatism, prudence and pragmatism, his sacrifice of ideal beauty and goodness in the person of Billy, for the sake of naval forms, and his suppression of the moral aspects of Billy's case and the emotional response of the crew, Captain Vere is closer to the scientific, utilitarian world of the *Monitors* than to the emotional, aesthetic and moral world of the *Victories*. Although Vere manages to keep temporary peace and order on his ship through military forms, the reader cannot help thinking that this order is achieved through the mechanization and dehumanization of the officers and crew. Stern claims that Vere «forces himself to behave according to the need for preservation of the humanity he commands» and for the sake of bringing «a redemptive horological paradise on earth», by killing Billy, «the false Messiah».[14]

These comments, however, appear over-enthusiastic when applied to the quality of life that administrators like Vere create in the man-of-war microcosm. The reader may also wonder whether Vere's active opposition to novel ideas, because they cause disorder and change of the status quo and are «at war with the peace of the world», actually results in «the true welfare of mankind», as Vere claims; for this welfare is achieved on his ship through the suppression of the thoughts, emotions and moral or spiritual concerns of the crew, and the destruction of beauty (p. 447). Not that the chaos of mutiny is desirable — Melville expresses his respect for law and order in «The House Top», «Dupont's Round Fight», and other poems in *Battle-Pieces* —but the dehumanization that Vere's «order» brings in *Billy Budd* is not a desirable condition either. Besides, Vere's «order» has not been able to prevent or control evil on the ship. On the contrary, evil personi-

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13. Harold Stessel, «Impenetrable Armour — All-Perforating Shot: Melville and the Technology of War», *Melville Society Extracts*, No. 29 (January 1977), 2.

14. Stern, p. 234.

fied by Claggart, has been in his service as a captain. Vere does not punish Claggart though he realizes Claggart is lying about Billy; nor does he protest against the naval chronicle which presents Claggart as an English officer, «respectable and discreet», and praises his «fidelity» and «strong patriotic impulse» (p. 503). The excuse of Vere and other naval authorities for sacrificing the truth is always military expediency. Bredahl, more perceptive than Stern, parallels Vere's speech for expediency to the speeches of Ahab and Pierre, to Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet and to the various Chaplain's speeches in Melville's works, and proves Melville's lifelong critical attitude towards both religious and political-military expediency.[15]

In shaping Billy's portrait Melville makes use of various historical and mythical allusions, or of allusions to works of art which he saw when he visited Europe. Billy is compared, for instance, to a statue of Hercules:

> Cast in a mold peculiar to the finest physical examples of those Englishmen in whom the Saxon strain would seem not at all to partake of any Norman or other admixture, he showed in face that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules (p. 436).

The reference is probably to the statue of the Farnese Hercules that Melville saw and admired in Italy: «Hercules Farnese — colossal. gravely [sic] benevolent face. The group of the bull; glorious».[16] Melville mentioned Hercules' statue again in his lecture «Statues in Rome»:

> Another noble statue, conceived in a very different spirit, is the Farnese Hercules, which in its simplicity and good nature reminds us of cheerful and humane things. This statue is not of that quick, smart, energetic strength that we should suppose would appertain to the powerful Samson or the mighty Hercules; but rather of a character like that of the large ox, confident of his own strength but loth to use

15. A. Carl Bredhal, Jr., *Melville's Angles of Vision* (Gainsville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1972), pp. 70-72.

16. *1856 Journal*, p. 184. Melville also mentions «Farnese Hercules & Farnese Toro» on p. 194.

> it. No trifles would call it forth; it is reserved only for great occasions.[17]

By comparing Melville's references to Hercules we see that the qualities he liked and later used to complete Billy's characterization are Hercules' large size, physical strength and harmony, combined with benevolence and unwillingness to use this strength unless necessary. Billy's beauty and basic innocence are also stressed through the allusion to some more works of art that Melville saw in Italy. While tracing Billy's descent to the old Britons, some of whom were taken captives to pagan Rome, and to the later British «barbarians» who were converted to Christianity by Rome, the narrator plays with the etymology of «angels» and «Angles» and the Pope's linguistic confusion when he saw the beauty of those barbarians:

> «Angles, do you call them? And is it because they look so like angels?» Had it been later in time, one would think that the Pope had in mind Fra Angelico's seraphs, some of whom, plucking apples in gardens on the Hesperides, have the faint rosebud complexion of the more beautiful English girls (pp. 494-95).

The reference to Hercules and Billy's association with the beautiful Britons and with Fra Angelico's angels form part of a complex pattern of historical, mythical, literary and other allusions. Melville utilizes these allusions to construct a synthetic portrait of the Handsome Sailor and not just of Billy, and to explore 1) how death can be transcended, 2) what are the possibilities or limitations of the forms created by the intellect and creative imagination, and 3) what kind of truth man can reach through these forms.

The handling of characters and action in the story proves the failure of society's various forms to comprehend or control the mystery of experience. The chaplain's cliché consolations to Billy, for example, point out the limitations of institutional Christianity and

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17. Sealts, *Melville as Lecturer*, p. 147. Sealts associates the journal description of Hercules with Melville's later references to Hercules in his lecture «Statues in Rome» and in *Billy Budd*. Morris Star, «Melville's Use of the Visual Arts», Diss. Northwestern Univ. 1964, p. 187, also adopts Sealt's associations between Melville's lecture and *Billy Budd*

its basic inability to provide either any answers to man's fear of death or any certainty about resurrection. Religious forms on board the *Bellipotent* ironically distort the essence of Christianity:

> Bluntly put, a chaplain is the minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War —Mars. As such, he is as incongruous as a musket would be on the altar at Christmas. 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 brute Force (pp. 495-96).

Political and military forms similarly fail either to provide man with absolute truths as answers to his basic anxiety, or to solve the mystery of evil —suffering, and death are manifestations of this evil. Melville's contemporary faith in progress, in social or religious institutions, and in the ability of the human intellect to explain the mysteries of the universe and to impose order on the chaos of experience, is undermined by the following events in *Billy Budd*: War, revolutions, mutinies, the Mutiny Act, Vere's inflexible and oppressive discipline, Claggart's intrigues, Billy's execution and the failure of the naval chronicle and the sailors' ballad to solve the mystery of Billy's case. What remains to be seen in the novella is to what extent the individual artist succeeds in what society fails, and what means the artist uses to do so. We should, therefore, focus on Melville's handling of artistic form in *Billy Budd*.

Seen within the context of Melville's early novels, in which the content determined or at times overpowered the form, *Billy Budd* appears to be the creation of a more self-conscious artist. It should not be hastily concluded, therefore, that its seemingly formless structure is owed to the fact that Melville died before he finished the last revision, or that he reached despair as an artist, as Obuchowski claims:

> Like Hawthorne, Melville wished an art that would discover order, not impose it. His final novel accepts that there is no order to discover and that, thus, art's role in the search is useless and empty. To make his message clear, Melville shatters purposely the artistic unity of the work.[18]

18. Peter Obuchowski, «*Billy Budd* and the Failure of Art», *Studies in Short*

As an answer to Obuchowski we might quote the narrator's comment about the nature of artistic form which best conveys truth:

> The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial (p. 501).

Although the events of the story undermine the narrator's neat classification of what is fiction and what is fact in the novella, they justify his preference for a «less finished» conclusion. Dryden says:

> Indeed, the juxtaposition of the fictional and factual realms results in the destruction of the authenticity of each and leaves the reader face to face with a positive emptiness, an oppressive and threatening blankness. Herman Melville's vision remains apocalyptic to the end. His metaphysics of emptiness led him to a recognition of the «secret absurdity» implicit in the novelist's commitment to «Vital Truth», and his devotion to that goal left silence as his only alternative.[19]

It will be interesting to test Dryden's rather pessimistic conclusions about Melville's metaphysical vision and his view of the novelist's role. A close reading of *Billy Budd* shows that one of its basic themes is the nature of truth. The way Melville handles the point of view, the characters and plot in the novella proves that truth for Melville is subjective, relative, and elusive, because experience keeps changing. Since experience keeps changing it is ultimately formless and incomprehensible, and consequently the human intellect can neither contain nor control it through the various forms it creates. The action in *Billy Budd* asserts the folly of the individual or society that believes in the ability of rational forms to impose order or convey absolute truths.

What the artist can do through his creative imagination, and this is what Melville does in *Billy Budd*, is to accept the flux of experience

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Fiction, 15, No. 4 (Fall 1978), 451.

19. Edgar Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 216.

as a given and convey the truth that there is no absolute truth; or, if there is one, that the human mind cannot perceive it —thus, art's role is not useless and empty as Obuchowski claims. The only way Melville's «execution» can be true to the «conception» of things stated above is by creating «imperfect» forms, forms that are flexible and open enough to reflect the continuous flux of experience and not its emptiness, as Dryden asserts. Seen in this light, Melville's use of a triple point of view in the interpretation of Billy's death, the narrator's frequent digressions and intrusions, the juxtaposition of fact and fiction, of contrasted ideas, images or character qualities, as well as the ambiguity created by Vere's secrecy, Billy's silence and the omission of Vere's and Billy's private discussion, are the best form Melville finds to convey his vision of a constantly changing experience and the relative nature of truth.[20]

During his European trips Melville admired the classical pieces of architecture and sculpture. In both his journals and his lecture «Statues in Rome» he praised their symmetrical structures as reflections of the artist's vision of a world in which the real and the ideal, Nature and man, artist and society co-existed in harmony. Melville himself tried to achieve greater discipline and symmetry of form by writing poems, in several of which, especially in the collections *Timoleon* and *Weeds and Wildings*, art became the subject matter. Despite the temporary sense ot order that poetry-writing gave him, however, and despite his admiration for the ideology and practice of classical art, Melville's vision of an unstable and disorderly world remained the same. The return to fiction-writing during the last years of his life, and the choice of the particular narrative technique in *Billy Budd*, show his need to return to a less disciplined and more plastic form of expression than his poetry, in order to convey this vision. No matter how much he admired the Parthenon or the Milan Cathedral for expressing, through their symmetrical form, a sense of religious order and hierarchy in the world, Melville could only choose a form close to Pisa's Leaning Tower to convey his own vision of a disorderly or

20. Kenneth Ledbetter, «The Ambiguity of *Billy Budd*», *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 4, No. 1 (Spring 1962), 134, finds that the excellence of *Billy Budd* stems «from the very ambiguity which Melville was incapable of preventing». We would be more fair to Melville, I think, if we asserted that the excellence of *Billy Budd* stems from the ambiguity Melville was capable of creating.

falling world;[21] or, if we accept Litman's view that, for Melville, «Grecian temples are the exemplification of absolute beauty. This is defined as the ideas of perfection expressed in material forms», we can understand why Melville could not choose forms reflecting absolute beauty or perfection to express his own vision of an imperfect world with relative values.[22]

Stern's comment about Melville's narrative technique, «the multiple view makes it clear that no one perceiver can bring out the totality of the thing»,[23] applied to *Billy Budd*, suggests the subjectivity of perception and relativity of truth as well as the limited capacity of the individual intellect to capture the total essence of a thing. This limited capacity is also pointed out by Brodkorb who analyses the use of language in *Billy Budd*:

> different languages may very well involve differing experiences of the world; and something like this seems to be implied in *Billy Budd*, where the various vocabularies out of various lexicons debate with each other and seem to reflect various experiences of particular phenomena in the story.
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> These vocabularies perform very much in the way that opposing critical camps in the «actual» world construe the supposed facts of the story, each position stated in its own characteristic rhetoric and each position reflecting a genuinely different experience of the story's events, characters, and implications.[24]

Melville's creation of this complex linguistic pattern and his dramatization of various rhetorical conflicts in *Billy Budd* enable him to point out the limitations of each viewer to comprehend and linguistically

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21. *1856 Journal*, pp. 170-71, 172-73 refer to the Parthenon; 238-39 refer to Milan Cathedral; 216 to Pisa's Tower. Poems about these monuments can be also found in Herman Melville's *Timoleon* (Norwood, Pa: Norwood Eds, 1976).

22. Vicki H. Litman, «The Cottage and the Temple: Melville's Symbolic Use of Architecture». *American Quarterly*, 21, No. 3 (1969), p. 636.

23. Milton Stern, «Some Techniques of Melville's Perception», *PMLA*, 73, No. 3 (June 1958), 255-56.

24. Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., «The Definitive *Billy Budd*: 'But Aren't It All Sham?'», *PMLA*, 82, No. 7 (December 1967), 608.

express the whole truth about the events. On the other hand, the linguistic variety and conflict mirror Melville's vision of a world of struggling polarities. Yet, Melville's realization of human intellectual limitations and his intermingling of fact and fiction in *Billy Budd* do not necessarily undermine the novelist's role, as Dryden claims. On the contrary, Melville affirms the novelist's function. Despite the contradictory facts which the various accounts of Billy's death present, they all affirm man's need to re-create inner and outer reality through his imagination; they further stress the importance of language as the valuable tool which man uses to give form to archetypal symbols and myths —Melville's positive view of the existing polarities in human experience and the artist's role as reconciler are well illustrated in his poem «Art», in *Timoleon*. What Melville, as a creative artist, does in *Billy Budd* is not imposing order on experience but reconciling or synthesizing both its contradictions and the various myths that artists and philosophers of the past created about it. The final synthesis constitutes his own myth. As regards the nature of this myth Franklin says: «*Billy Budd* returns to the central theme of mythmaking, but the mythic god created by Vere and his sailors is as much a god as the Confidence Man».[25]

If we see Billy as the mythic god in the novella we certainly limit its scope considerably. Melville returns in *Billy Budd* to the central theme of mythmaking, as Franklin asserts, but he creates the myth of the Handsome Sailor, part of which is *Billy Budd's* myth. The Handsome Sailor in *Billy Budd* is a combined portrait of 1) Jack Chase to whom *Billy Budd* is dedicated, 2) Lord Nelson, «the greatest sailor since our world began», 3) the black sailor whom the narrator saw and admired in Liverpool, «the center of a company of his shipmates», and a «black pagod of a fellow» (p. 430), and 4) all the handsome sailors Melville created in his previous sea novels and poems. Perhaps we can draw from Rathbun's description some common features of all the above handsome sailors:

> A sort of natural regality obtains in such men. The handsome sailors, whom seamen recognize and to whom they respond, possess a strength and beauty in excess of that of ordinary

25. H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 206.

men, and their moral natures correspond closely to their physical beauty.[26]

By focusing on the process of myth-making in *Billy Budd* and by completing the Handsome Sailor myth which he started in his early works, Melville as an artist affirms the power of the creative imagination to capture and utilize archetypal forms which exist in the collective unconscious of the human race. These forms are flexible and durable enough to surpass in capacity those «closed» forms (religious, military, political) created by the human intellect. Despite the fact that the artist draws raw material from the chaos of experience, his imagination transforms this chaos into meaningful objects. *Billy Budd*, like «Benito Cereno» before it, is not meant to enlighten readers who seek absolute truths or clear-cut answers concerning the nature or problems of experience; but it can be seen as an affirmation of the superiority of the creative imagination over the intellect; for, instead of trying to comprehend and control experience, which is impossible, imagination transforms it or synthesizes its various polarities, and thus it gives temporary meaning to it (experience). The great variety of critical interpretations of *Billy Budd* and its continuing popularity prove that its «open» form allows it to grow with every new reading. They also prove that Melville's effort to point out the subjective or relative nature of truth has been successful.

In addition to affirming man's creative imagination, Melville also affirms inner order and beauty, magnanimity and heroism as means of transcending death, as values which give importance and purpose to human life; all his handsome sailors share these qualities which he immortalizes. Although physical death is the end of everybody's life, Melville sees it as a necessary evil, as the inevitable threshold one has to cross to attain immortality. He also sees death as transformation. The picturesque images he creates in connection with two of his handsome sailors seem to illustrate this. The narrator describes Nelson's oaken ship, the *Victory*, which is floating at Portsmouth, as a decaying relic of a heroic past. Billy's corpse is also described lying among the «oozy weeds» at the bottom of the sea, in a sleeping posture, like

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26. John W. Rathbun, «*Billy Budd* and the Limits of Perception», *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 20, No. 1 (June 1965), 26.

that of the dead Admiral in «The Haglets» (pp. 441, 505).[27] Yet, the decaying ship is the monument of Nelson's «fame incorruptible» and Billy's death has caused the creation of several myths in the nautical world. Placed within the context of Nature's eternal cycle, physical decay and death always lead to rebirth. Thus Melville's use of picturesque images, suggesting the transformative power of physical death, expresses his hope for man's rebirth. Moreover, Melville's preference for the aesthetic asymmetry of the picturesque in *Billy Budd* shows his final abandonment of classical models of form, despite the admiration he expressed for them in his previous work.

Seen in the context of Melville's work as a whole, the Handsome Sailor has the gigantic dimensions of Melville's early heroes, such as Ahab, Pierre, John Paul Jones and others, but he does not have any of their negative qualities —in this respect, he is closer to Ethan Allen. Both the life and death of this superman benefit mankind, and the myth which Melville has created about him, a synthesis of myths constructed by man throughout the centuries, immortalizes in his person physical beauty combined with moral and spiritual qualities. Seen from an aesthetic point of view, the myth of the Handsome Sailor shows Melville's final return to the sublime in the creation of his last protagonist. Only the models for his last sublime hero are borrowed from the history, mythology and art of the Old World. This choice proves Melville's gradual alienation from his contemporary America whose reality betrayed its myth, as well as his increasing interest in the past of Western Civilization, and especially in the British past.

While writing his myth Melville finally affirms the value of the creative imagination which is more plastic than pure intellect and more capable of perceiving and conveying the constant flux and conflicts of experience. Neither the intellect nor imagination can solve the problems of experience. The inflexible forms produced by the analytical intellect, such as religious, political, military, social, scientific ones, provide a deceptive sense of order, Melville suggests. The more flexible forms of the imagination, however, as well as its transformative and synthetic power can achieve temporary order through the creation of an artistic object. The object and the creator may be eventually

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27. «The Haglets», *John Marr and Other Sailors* (Norwood, Pa: Norwood eds, 1976), pp. 65-76.

destroyed by Time, Melville seems to say, but the artistic activity itself is part of Nature's creative force and thus it is eternal. The finite artist, on the other hand, in Melville's consciousness appears as a seer, as a synthesizer of what the past and present have to offer, or as a reconciler of life's polarities, as an interpreter and defender of moral, aesthetic and spiritual values, and as a prophet. Melville's incessant labor with writing until his death is the best proof of his faith in art and his own role as an artist, despite his various disappointments or problems with the world around him. The quantity and quality of his work are the best answers to critics who claim that he preferred silence or that he saw writing as an empty activity.

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