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The Unity of *Billy Budd*

MELVILLE'S LAST COMPLETE WORK, *Billy Budd*, was not finished until 1891, the year of Melville's death, and it did not appear in print until 1924. Even then, the first printed version, prepared by Raymond Weaver, was not completely authentic because of the chaotic condition of the manuscript. A final, scholarly transcription was made by F. Barron Freeman in 1948.¹ Freeman's verified version, however, revealed nothing startling in itself. What it did do was indicate the tremendous seriousness with which Melville took the labor of composing his final work, the conscious effort and energy which he expended on it almost up to the last hours of his life. Most important, it removed doubts concerning the finality with which *Billy Budd* could be read critically, for it established a text which we can be reasonably certain represents Melville's final and deliberate intention.

This is important because so much that has been written about this short novel has been tentative and uncertain. In brief, the criticism of *Billy Budd* has represented two points of view. The first is that which sees the work as Melville's "testament of acceptance", without making it in any way clear what that acceptance represented; the second the view that *Billy Budd* is a reflection of its author's final confusion and disappointment, an unnecessarily expanded and wasteful work. Both judgments are, in my opinion, wrong, and their error arises from an original error in reading.

*Billy Budd* has been seen as an attempt at conventional tragedy, with Billy as tragic hero confronted by the fateful choice between two traditional extremes: order at the expense of justice or justice at the expense of order. Had Billy demanded justice, he would not have accepted Captain Vere's judgment. Not to have accepted the judgment would have represented a denial of the law (and order) upon which the judgment was based. Since order represents a means of controlling evil, the choice of anything else would have represented the triumph of evil (Claggart). Melville has set the whole sequence up cleverly to parallel the crucifixion, so that the incident mirrors Christ's agony and depicts Christ's choice of death in the service of the law. The law is God (Vere). It is absolute. Justice is for Man. Christ (and Billy) as God-Man chose the law and suffered death, for it is only in terms of the law that evil can be defeated. The very concept of justice gives reality to evil—a choosing between the ambiguities of right and wrong. Billy's choice is thus read as

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¹MELVILLE'S BILLY BUDD, ed. F. Barron Freeman. Harvard University Press.
equivalent to Christ's agony and as an indication of Melville's final acceptance of the doctrine of Christian atonement.

Having taken such a position, however, the critic finds himself in difficulty, for what is he to do with the events of the novel which are not concerned directly with Billy's defection and punishment? Billy's career, while representing the central events of the narrative, makes up approximately one-third of the total story, and it is surrounded by events and references dealing with philosophical, political, and aesthetic matters apparently only distantly related to Billy's personal predicament. The easiest answer to this problem, and the one most frequently given, is merely to suggest that such matters are extraneous: obvious but minor defects in an interesting work, short-comings which Melville, had he lived, would have corrected. The second, and most obvious answer, is to say that such apparent disorder was simply a mirroring of Melville's own confusion and uncertainty and that the work is a failure in consequence of it.

The fallacy of the first position is obvious since the publication of Mr. Freeman's edition of Billy Budd, for it shows us that Melville had worked out a shorter version of the tale, entitled Baby Budd, in which Billy occupies a dominant position and there is little "digression"; but Mr. Freeman shows also that this version was discarded by its author as unsatisfactory and evidently incomplete. Since Melville worked at the writing of Billy Budd for more than two and one-half years, we can consider the work nothing less than the result of his considered and mature deliberation. The fallacy of the second position can be disclosed only by showing that there is no moral equivocation, as Richard Chase calls it, in Billy Budd and that the apparent digressions are part and parcel of the total unity of the work.

The initial mistake is to persist in thinking of Billy Budd as a tragedy at all. The subject of the novel is adequately suggested in Melville's brief preface, the opening sentence of which reads as follows:

The year 1797, the year of this narrative, belongs to a period which as every thinker now feels, involved a crisis for Christendom not exceeded in its undetermined momentousness at the time by any other era whereof there is record.

This crisis, of course, represents the events surrounding the revolution in France, and it is significant that Melville apparently saw the events of the mutinies at Spithead and at the Nore as symbolic of the threat to world order posed by the revolution. Any reader of Melville knows that he was greatly concerned with the historic development of mankind and that he saw Christianity as the center of an order which seemed gradually but inevitably to be passing away. It was probably because of this view that he could think of himself only as a nominal, not an orthodox, Christian. Any reader of Clarel understands the approximate terms upon which this state of mind was based
during the later years of Melville’s life. Both Clarel and Billy Budd might have been titled, less imaginatively, “The Crisis of Christendom”, with Christendom standing not only for the formal aspects of religion, but for all of the philosophical, political, and moral concerns of Man.

In these terms Billy Budd is Man—Christian man as well as historic man. Though he is presented with obvious simplicity, he contains the ambiguities of all of Melville’s heroes from Ahab to The Confidence Man. In Christian terms he is Christ, but with typical Christian ambiguity, he is both the Son of Man and the Son of God. Whence came he? In philosophical and political terms, he sailed first as a common sailor on the Rights of Man, but was later impressed aboard his Majesty’s warship the Indomitable. It is remarkable how little attention critics have paid to the names of these two vessels, as well as to the ship which appears at the end of the story: the French warship Athiaste, formerly the St. Louis. The contrast between life aboard the Rights of Man and that aboard the Indomitable is the contrast between the Lockean and the Hobbesian points of view. The order of the first is that imposed by Billy’s primitive innocence: the common-sense example of good backed up by physical force when necessary. The Indomitable is ruled by a concept of absolute order imposed by authority and depending upon fealty to the source of legislated power. Historically, however, it is the distinction between primitive society (which, of course, Melville knew well and at first hand) and the era of what he called “citiﬁed man”. Theologically, it is the contrast of pagan and Christian order.

Freeman presents evidence to show that at one point Melville considered naming the Indomitable, the Bellipotente. Such a title must have seemed to him ﬁnally too inclusive, too pointedly aimed at the religious level of his tale. Nevertheless, the religious level is primary during the period of Billy’s difficulties aboard the second ship, and the parallel of Billy’s execution for technical mutiny and the cruciﬁxion have been clearly and commonly seen. Christ’s godlike innocence is mirrored in Billy’s natural innocence; Christ’s humanity in Billy’s natural (physical) defect of speech; Christ’s agony in submitting to the Will of Heaven in Billy’s submission to the authority of Captain Vere. Captain Vere’s exclamation following the death of Claggart (the naturally depraved) by the hand of Billy—“Struck dead by an angel of God. Yet the Angel must hang!”—reflected the paradox of atonement by which Christ suffered the agony of death in order to release mankind from the bondage of evil.

It is clear that Melville saw the idea of the Fall and the Atonement as an accurate image of man’s predicament (See Clarel, XV, 249, The Works of Herman Melville, 1924); this level of Billy Budd is the one with which critics have primarily concerned themselves. What is important is that Melville held it as image, not as orthodox religion. As such it was nearer an aesthetic than a theological concept. This is important, because it follows that the cruciﬁxion
becomes tragedy, mirroring man's incompleteness; the victory over evil is transient and incomplete. Such a view is expressed in the Christ-like aspect of Ahab in Moby Dick. Whereas in Moby Dick, however, we have the tragic view expressed directly, in Billy Budd it is merely reflected as parable. Melville had written in Clarel:

   Historic memory goes so far
   Backward through the long desiles of doom;
   Whoso consults it honestly
   That mind grows prescient in degree;
   For man, like God, abides the same
   Always. (XV, p. 248)

In Billy Budd Melville is merely consulting "historic memory", and what he discovers is that man and God are always the same. Billy is budding man, yet he is also the budding God. As primitive man Billy lives at comparative ease with his shipmates aboard the Rights of Man—a society similar to that pictured in Typee. Transferred, however, to the Indomitable—emerging into the era of citified man, he has left nature behind him, except as he himself represents it aboard the second vessel. As a representative of nature, he does the natural thing, strikes out at the evil with which he is confronted. It is Claggart's eloquence (the ability to make a fair case for an evil cause) which is the mark of his duplicity. The mark of primitive man is his completeness, his oneness with nature; but he lacks eloquence, he depends upon intuition and action. Citified man faces nature, as John Crowe Ransom has stated handsomely in a recent article, "in guilt and fear toward that Nature who no longer contained him but indifferently confronted him." Melville has Captain Vere say, after acknowledging that Billy's action was no more than "natural": "But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King."

The question I take it Melville is raising here is this: If the King's authority is gone, and Nature's, what then supports us? Billy dies for his impulsive act with a prayer for Captain Vere (vir—man) upon his lips. A little later the Indomitable meets up with the French warship Atléiste (formerly the King's ship, the St. Louis) and engages her. The Indomitable survives the engagement, sinking the Atléiste, but Captain Vere, who is also the old god, perhaps even the father of Billy, dies with Billy's name upon his lips, not, as Melville says, "in accents of remorse", but as though transferring his authority to his son: Billy the Son of God and the Son of Man; God become Man and Man become God.

It seems clear that this is Melville's view of the crucifixion—the old God superseded by the new; God as myth. The story of Billy Budd then represents the origin of myth, myth which mirrors man's tragic situation; but is not an attempt at tragedy itself. It is set in a period which represents, in Melville's words, "a crisis for Christendom", a period in which atheism is averted but
which has only (possibly) in the story of Billy Budd brought forth a new myth to replace it. *Billy Budd* is to be seen, then, somewhat as prophecy, or as an expression of faith. Such an idea had been expressed earlier in *Clarel*:

... the gods are gone.

*Tully scarce dreamed they could be won
Back into credance; less that earth
Ever could know yet mightier birth
Of Deity. He died. Christ came.
And, in due hour, that impious Rome,
Emerging from vast wreck and shame,
Held the forefront of Christendom.
The inference? The lesson?—come:
Let fools count on faith's closing knell—
Time, God, are inexhaustible.

(XIV, pp. 128-129)

*Billy Budd* is an example of how the new birth will come, winning for mankind a unity such as they knew under Christianity, under the gods of antiquity, or in their primitive innocence. Is this too optimistic a view? Melville's last years have been seen as full of darkness and despair. He himself said of these years that he was neither optimist nor pessimist, nevertheless he relished the pessimism of Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*, "if for nothing else than as a counterpoise to the exorbitant hopefulness, juvenile and shallow, that makes such a bluster in these days—at least in some quarters." If he was optimistic, then, at least it was not the kind of optimism which he recognized "in some quarters."

If the subject of *Billy Budd* is, as we suggest, the renewal of myth, is it Melville's intention to imply that we are simply awaiting the arrival of a new Messiah? In one sense, yes. We must not assume, as did Tully, that since the old gods are gone no new ones will arise to perform the unification performed by the old. On the other hand, Melville is quite specific about a certain danger—the danger of following false gods; and he is equally specific about the method whereby he believes the new will be enabled to arise. It is this which the critics of *Billy Budd* have heretofore failed to see in those passages which they have labeled extraneous.

Let us begin first with the danger. I have said that the victim of Billy's natural wrath, Claggart, clothed his duplicity by a fairness of appearance which included his ability to speak falsehood under the appearance of truth. Undisguised truth (which is what Billy's innocence represents) is hateful because antipodal to evil. Billy is budding man—primitive man: John Locke's *tabula rasa*. Claggart is the Hobbesian man in whom cunning and intelligence have been substituted for brute force. Mythical man (or Captain Vere) stands squarely between these two opposing concepts. He is intelligent but dreamy—sometimes known as "Starry" Vere. He wears the authority of his office openly
and plainly, as did Lord Nelson, who insisted upon wearing the scarlet and gold-braid even in the midst of battle. The life of Vere (and Nelson) is open to scrutiny, and upon a certain level it is reflected in the beauty of their vessels, the ornaments of their office, the attractions of ceremony, and the eloquence of their commands. Upon another level, however, such ornaments only served to mask the ugly injustices afflicting the common sailors under their command. Here is Melville's dilemma, and the dilemma which supplies the dramatic framework for his tale. If we correct the injustices in the name of humanity, do we not also commit ourselves to the giving up of all of those beauties which the old order had cherished? Yes, Melville finally concedes, we do. We exchange Nelson's ornate dress for drab, because in calling attention to himself, Nelson endangered the lives of those under him. We relinquish the ceremony of authority, because to delay weighing anchor as Nelson did was dangerous and impractical in a world where ceremony is no longer observed. We surrender the grand lines of Nelson's flagship Victory to the more functional and less beautiful design of the Monitor. Yet we do not accede to the demands of revolution—atheism. We have come full circle, but only in the sense that pagan civilization had come full circle at the time of Tully. We are faced with what Melville, in Clarel, had called "civil barbarism": "Man disennobled—brutalized/ By popular science—atheized/ Into a smatterer" (XV, p. 250).

We then are faced by the same danger which Captain Vere faced in his engagement with the Athéiste: civil barbarism. The Athéiste is, significantly, not a vessel in its own right, but one merely captured and renamed. The question of identity here is related to Melville's concept of truth and reality. Atheism, which was the product of popular science, was doomed simply because it did not express truth and reality. Captain Vere was doomed, but for an entirely different reason ("The gods are gone"); the Indomitable survived both the St. Louis and the Athéiste, but the implication is clear that the crisis is one merely of discovering a new captain. Melville's attitude toward popular science is further clarified in an ironic passage labeled "A Digression", which occurs in the narrative just after Billy's death. The Purser and the ship's Surgeon are discussing what everyone had considered the remarkable nature of Billy's dying. The Purser suggested that will-power might have been responsible for the absence of the usual physical manifestations, but the Surgeon ridicules such an idea, saying it is no more attributable to will-power than to horsepower. He admits that the event was phenomenal only "in the sense that it was an appearance the cause of which is not immediately to be assigned."

The Purser then suggests euthanasia. "Euthanasia", the Surgeon replies, "is something like your will-power; I doubt its authenticity as a scientific term. . . . It is at once imaginative and metaphysical,—in short, Greek."

It seems clear that if Melville was optimistic it was not with the arrogant optimism of Nineteenth Century science. This is further indicated in the report of Billy's death supplied by a writer of popular prose, the reporter of
News from the Mediterranean; here (as with the Surgeon) the truth is hidden beneath a false appearance of truth. If Claggart represents malicious evil (natural depravity), the Surgeon represents the evil of ignorance, while the popular reporter, pretending to serve constituted authority, tells the grossest falsehood of all. All are forms of dissimulation—the dangers confronting modern man in his search for truth. Where then does truth lie?

The answer, of course, is inherent in the novel itself. As is so often the case, however, Melville had considered the problem explicitly in Clarel:

Suppose an instituted creed  
(or truth or fable) should indeed  
To ashes fall; the spirit exhales,  
But reinfunds in active forms:  
Verse, popular verse, it charms or warms—  
Bellies philosophy’s flattened sails—  
Tinctures the very book, perchance,  
Which claims arrest of its advance.  
(XV, p. 105)

Here is an almost exact duplication of the situation in Billy Budd. Christianity and all it implies has fallen into decay. The spirit exhales, but only momentarily, awaiting the propitious moment again to belly philosophy’s sails. Billy’s act of innocent heroism supplies the opportunity—creates the situation. Authoritarianism and a changing concept of man’s individual worth had conspired to bring about the destruction of the old gods. Billy’s act (and by extension, Christ’s) is seen more as tragic circumstance than as actual atonement. From Billy’s act then springs the new myth, sung to the tune of a simple sailors’ ballad. It is “verse, popular verse” which bellies the sails, which supplies the common man with a means of confronting the facts, not only of Billy’s death, but of his own. It is not orthodox Christianity. It is not popular science. It is the simple creative act which pierces the mask of falsehood and error, which sees man’s existence as an heroic submission to fate, but which is in constant rebellion against those forms which result in man’s injustice to man.

If it seems odd that so apparent and so integrated a theme should have been missed by so many readers, the fact of its having been missed is only additional evidence of the difficulty which the modern reader has with the ironic style in which Billy Budd is composed. The difficulty is multiplied in this case, because Melville did not employ (indeed, could not have employed) the lyric-ironic style of Moby Dick, to which we have, after a lapse of many years, become accustomed. Accompanying the positive theme of man’s rejuvenation through myth, there is also, as we have indicated, the negative one of modern man’s situation in an over-materialistic society: “atheized into a smatterer”. In a satiric-ironic manner, Melville pretends to adopt the very style of the popular-prose writer against whom his book is at least partially directed. Despite the fact that his central theme betrays his principal intention—he had elsewhere
written, "It is not the purpose of literature to purvey news"—he pretended to have written a story which, as he says, "has less to do with fable than with fact". He speaks of digressions and ragged edges, as though the very essence of truth lay in its absence of form. He pretends, in other words, to have written the very book which claims arrest of the advance of truth, or fable, or of instituted creeds; but the theme itself, the form which he has created in *Billy Budd*, tinctures the very book which he pretends to have written—the book of factual information concerning a mutiny at sea.

Contrary to current critical opinion, then, *Billy Budd* as a unified work not only is not marred by digressions and irrelevancies, it is a triumph of architectonic structure. When Melville protests that as a writer of "facts" he is prevented from achieving "an architectural finial", he is merely calling attention (in a method not uncommon in literature) to his central theme, which is in fact presented as an architectural finial, since it lies imbedded in the popular ballad "Billy in the Darbies", which ends the book.

*But they'll lash me in hammock, drop me deep.*
*Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep.*
*I feel it stealing now. Sentry, are you there?*
*Just ease these darbies at the wrist,*
*And roll me over fair.*
*I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.*

This is not great poetry, but it was not intended to be. Neither is it, as one critic calls it, doggerel. It is intended merely to represent the primitive, but universal, ability of man to temper the harsh facts of death, to come to terms with nature, through art. It represents Melville's final expression of faith in mankind—faith in the ability of the common man to see beyond the misrepresentations of evil, however disguised; faith that the essential beauty and heroism of man will always be recognized and celebrated in artistic form, however crude.

*Billy Budd* is not in itself a tragedy, although it is an expression of belief in the tragic predicament of man. If we need distinguish it by supplying a name, I would suggest that it be called satiric-allegory. It does not pretend to the organ voice of *Moby Dick*. It combines the biting irony of Swiftian satire with the lyric hopefulness of John Bunyan. That it has been so little understood need not finally surprise us when we consider the history of Melville's literary career from *Mardi* onward. Among other things, *Billy Budd* suggests the possibility that Melville believed the rich tongue of Shakespeare (the use of which he borrowed in *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*) to be as obsolete as the scarlet and gold of Lord Nelson's office. Perhaps this is why he chose to write otherwise in his final work.