

A SYMBOLICAL READING  
OF  
*BILLY BUDD*

By

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I

One of the fundamental problems in *Billy Budd*, Melville's final novel, is related to the difficulty of interpreting Billy's character. Is he an allegorical figure, a Christ figure, or just a simple-minded sailor? As he is described with a number of human characteristics which are sometimes contradictory, it is not necessarily easy to offer a concrete and solid image of his character. He is depicted as baby, child, angel, barbarian, Greek god, and Christ. These briefly evince the mixture of pagan and divine qualities. Whatever the circumstances, a question arises as to what Billy really stands for. Though innocent but threatened by evil and put to death eventually, he appears totally submissive to his fate like Melville's celebrated protagonist Bartleby, a scrivener. Yet Billy's status as a symbolical figure of rare innocence and purity finally rises to a point

to gather universal respect and affection even after his fateful death. Without doubt his death attains eternity.

*Billy Budd* reveals conflicts between man-made law and God's law, good and evil, life and death, time and eternity, idealism and realism, innocence and experience. In these conflicts Melville shows not only the cosmic tension of universal conflicts but also dramatic interactions between human and divine laws. This essay will attempt to clarify the significance of these universal conflicts. The following discussion will first concentrate on analyzing such major characters as Billy Budd, John Claggart, and Captain Vere and some other minor characters.

First, Billy Budd: he is superbly built, tall, young, fresh, handsome, courageous, and pure-minded. His complexion appears like "the lily" or "the rose." The details of his birth, however, are obscure. Exotic with "big hoops of gold and a Scotch Highland bonnet" and like "a native African of the unadulterated blood of Ham," he is "a rustic beauty" displaying reposeful good nature found in 'Hercules' sculpture.' Besides, as if veiled with beauty and love, he reveals slight femininity. He has something mysterious that suggests "Aphrodite"—the Goddess of beauty and love. Furthermore, "with little or no self-consciousness," he looks like a Goddess-sent baby, being very innocent and only foreseeing the immediate future. And as "the evoker of pride," he evokes human pride in other men; inwardly and outwardly, he is truly handsome. Gentle, honest, and brisk, he easily earns affection from other shipmates. Paying the best tribute to Billy, Captain Graveling refers to him as "a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy," "the jewel," and "my peace-maker." Also, Lieutenant Ratcliffe looks upon Billy as "the flower," "my beauty," and "Apollo." Simple-minded and pure, Billy is exempted from sinister dexterity and double-dealings.

Interestingly, however, his simplicity sometimes makes it difficult to adjust himself to the formalities and disciplines of the navy. On one occasion, he is much terrified to see a man lashed and comes to fear the intangible threat of austere rules. On another occasion, when he is made advances to by a chubby shipmate, what

he can do is only get angry at the shipmate's insinuation. Billy is totally ignorant of any kind of artifice. His intellect, intact and pure, comes from sound human nature which does not know evil. He appears much like "Adam before the Fall." His uncivilized and unsophisticated nature prevents him from perceiving the presence of iniquity, and it is not until Claggart accuses him openly that he notices the unexpected presence of evil. Eventually, he decides to accept a sacrificial death like Christ.

Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere is nicknamed "Starry Vere." As a sailor of distinction, he has seen "much service, been in various engagements, been allied to the high nobility." Strict in rule and behavior as he is, he is thoughtful and "mindful of the welfare of his men." He also has "a virtue aristocratic in kind" with a resolute nature and is grave, modest, and profound in temper and thought. Unlike Billy, he is a civilized well-read man, philosophizing upon the conditions and meanings of life. With respect to Vere's reading, the critic William H. Shurr comments that it, "carefully reported by the author, is a search for models of behavior, not for the knowledge of how one ought to behave based on principles and ideas."<sup>1</sup> Through his reading and philosophy, Vere has acquired some kind of conviction about life.

At times, Vere appears as a romantic figure, brooding with "a certain dreaminess of mood," yet he immediately tries to control himself, letting his reason gain an advantage over his emotion. As a man of reason and justice, he has a sound sense of detecting Claggart's evilness and, superbly, calls Billy "Adam before the Fall," because he has recognized Billy's innocence. Vere appears as a Father figure who judges between good and evil, innocence and experience. Eventually, because of martial law, he is destined to pass strict judgment upon Billy. In talking with Billy, they seem to have reached a mutual understanding, as is evident from Billy's last words, "God bless Captain Vere." Merlin Bowen remarks that Vere does not follow his conscience because his "philosophical austerity" makes him unable to feel.<sup>2</sup> This statement, however, seems false, because Vere is apparently sympathetic towards Billy.

John Claggart is a man about thirty-five, "somewhat spare and tall, yet of no ill figure"; yet he has a pale complexion that suggests something morbid. Just as little is known about Billy's origin, nothing is known of his former career. He has been quickly promoted to the master-at-arms, whose part of job is to preserve order on a ship. From the start, he is conscious of Billy, whose impeccable goodness and purity make him jealous and malicious. Melville describes that between the two characters there is the "deadly space." It seems that Claggart's hostility towards Billy is innate almost as if it derives from Claggart's natural depravity. Claggart has a demon in his mind, and he cannot get rid of it. He cannot help disdaining Billy, because he sees that goodness by nature makes the brilliancy of Billy.

Melville questions whether evil resides in the human heart or in the universe, and in Claggart's case it is described as present in his heart. Melville asserts that Claggart's evil is such "for which the Creator alone is responsible." This strain of thought is also discovered in *Moby-Dick*, where the whale is a creation (symbol) of evil Creator. Melville cannot help paying attention to the irresistible presence of evil in the universe, and he perceives the presence of positive evil which does evil for evil's sake. By nature, Claggart's fate is to accomplish what the inside evil orders him. Driven by the "private mentor" of evil, he wallows in iniquity and tries to trap Billy. Claggart is a doomed figure and finally gets killed like Anaias, who was punished for his lie by God.

Two minor characters will be touched upon hereafter. Dansker (alias "Board-her-in-the-smoke") is an old man, a sage figure preaching wisdom to Billy. "Of few words, many wrinkles, and some honorable scars," he is the mainmast-man of the navy ship *Indomitable* which Billy boards. Dansker calls Billy "Baby Budd," taking notice of his innocent purity. On two occasions when Billy seeks answers for some troubles from him, he mysteriously replies, "Jimmy Legs [Claggart] is down on you." Dansker is aware of the apparent opposition between Billy and Claggart, but he does not do any more than warn Billy to be careful. He could be a guardian angel, but

he is limited and helpless himself, since his main trait is the "pithy guarded cynicism."

Before Billy's execution, a chaplain visits him in custody with an intention to console him and save his soul. He discovers, however, that Billy needs little help from him. He perceives that Billy's absolute innocence and purity are more suitable for his salvation than Christian creeds, and he therefore takes no action to change Billy's mind and fate. The chaplain serves as a spokesman to display the delicate relationship between angelic innate innocence and human religion. Billy's case makes the chaplain feel himself incongruous about his own situation because he serves two Gods at once—"the Prince of Peace" and "the God of War—Mars." Thus, Melville depicts contradictory conflicts in this novel, which represents, in a way, the epitome of society and the world.

## II

Symbols are abundant in this novel. As seen above, Billy is referred to as Apollo, peacemaker, lily, baby, jewel, flower, beauty, Adam, and Hercules. More than these terms, he is identified as pagoda, Aldebaran, Cynosure, Alexander, and a St. Bernard dog. What do these appellations signify? They are taken from the ancient history of mankind and mythology, and in all they indicate Billy almost as the paragon of excellent humanist and godly qualities. Biblical, mythological, astrological, and superstitious allusions are frequently used to represent Billy's life and death, and he becomes a symbolical figure. Furthermore, Melville's allusions to the moon, the sea, the mist, the tinted snow, the stars, light, darkness, mass versus individual, civilization versus barbarism, the names of warships appearing from the *Rights* to the *Indomitable*, which conquers the *Atheist*—all these allusions and symbols contribute to building the basic

symbolical structure of this novel. Melville shows Billy as a representative of primitive nature; primitive in the sense that he is less adaptable to the moral and order of the modern world and that because of his pure innocence he tends to be an outsider. And primitive in the sense that he represents the original nature of man, and he becomes a metaphorical figure. He represents the ancient and original order of the universe, which often becomes a subversive power to the human world.

What is, then, Billy's innocence? His innocence is at once metaphorical and radical. Metaphorical, because it has a unique life of its own as a symbol. Most shipmates favor his innocence, but they do not really understand the deepest significance of it, which must perish on account of earthly order. Only Vere, Dansker, Claggart, and a chaplain realize the truth of it, and for them it rises as a universal symbol. It is also radical, because it has the power to change earthly order. This is why Vere decides to put Billy to death. Billy's innocence makes him too ignorant of himself. When Dansker advises him to be cautious of Claggart, he seems surprised, and, not knowing what to do, he is helpless, for instance, before Claggart's inexplicable lashing him about spilt food.

Interestingly, noble, pure, and angelic as he is, he is not perfect and "nor quite a dove"; he retains earthiness, and his stammer is described as "the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden." On earth man is far from perfection, and touching on Billy's stammer, James E. Miller says that it is "emblematic of his human imperfection, a symbol of the necessity for his adhering to the human condition because of his inborn incapacity to attain the divine."<sup>3</sup> Billy is not perfect, and this is an important point, because that defect chains him to the earth and conversely makes him a symbolical figure. Symbols are created from earthy realities.

As an unadulterated nature child, Billy reveals barbaric qualities which are in no sense related to the moral values of Christianity. Then why does he appear as a Christ figure? His death scene, for instance, is veiled with mystic atmosphere and full of hints to suggest his transformations as a Christ. Without doubt

Melville attaches a Christ image to Billy, and some shipmates take him for a Christ figure. Unlike Christ, however, Billy is not a martyr of God. Though at the final moment Billy exclaims "God bless Captain Vere" and appears to show mutual forgiveness and understanding, his words never mean that he has Christian belief. As a chaplain sees, Billy is "a fellow man, a felon in martial law, one who, though on confines of death, he could never convert to a dogma." Billy has no relationship with human law, and the sacrifice of his original innocence and purity makes him a Christ figure. Though his execution is the fratricide of human pride and excellence, his sacrifice emerges as an invaluable truth. Billy's purity and innocence are ephemeral in this fallen world where evil always lurks.

Billy's tragedy is that he has to be subject to human law and order. As member of society, he has to be integrated into society, whatever kind it may be, so that the law and order of the society can be kept. Melville calls such a man-made world as "domestic heaven.":

This 'tis to have been from the first  
 In a domestic heaven nursed,  
 Under the discipline serve  
 Of Fairfax and the starry Vere.<sup>4</sup>

This poem dedicated to Vere suggests his ruling power in the society-like world of constellation. Like Vere, men try to keep their "domestic heaven," whatever it is, excluding outsiders, as far as it suits them well. Billy, the "Aldebaran," is one of the brilliant stars in Vere's world, from which he fatefully drops, "tossed up by the horns of Taurus."

Vere has a firm belief in his idea about the order of the world and the standard of human necessity and judgment. Not only enforced by the fear of mutiny but also from his temperament, his allegiance to order is fairly strong. He perceives that man is subject to God's law as well as man's law and, eventually, he enforces man's law—in his case, the martial law—on Billy; for he thinks that since Billy is a man-of-war, he has obligation to obey it:

But in natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered? 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 sigh sad assent. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the king.<sup>5</sup>

Vere believes that man should follow man's law as long as he has his responsibility in society.

The notion of human responsibility toward earthly and heavenly (natural) laws is most fundamental in Melville's world. Man, though endowed with a free will, needs a certain law; otherwise without order the world becomes chaotic. Man's law and God's law seem, in some crucial points, unreconciliatory, but quite often man faces a situation in which it becomes necessary to choose either of them. F. O. Matthiessen remarks on this point of necessary choice as follows:

... if Billy is young Adam before the Fall, and Claggart is almost the Devil incarnate, Vere is the wise Father, terribly severe but righteous. No longer does Melville feel the fear and dislike of Jehovah that were oppressing him through *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. He is no longer protesting against the determined laws as being savagely inexorable. He has come to respect necessity.<sup>6</sup>

This sheer necessity often taxes man in giving a difficult decision. That the three men with whom Vere discusses Billy's case feel hesitant about the captain's decision implies their dilemma as to the choice between man's law and God's law. Vere is not himself exempt from the same kind of dilemma. Like anguished Abraham, he has to sacrifice his son: "the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation." In this instance, Billy's last words that "God bless Captain Vere" is ironic. These words strike Vere with a strong impact, because Vere realizes again that he has chose man's law instead of God's law, and Billy's words sounded like unlooked-for pardon:

Captain Vere, either through stoic self-control or a sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock, stood erectly rigid as a

musket in the ship-armorer's rack.<sup>7</sup>

Vere again faces the powerful presence of divine law. And he thereby suffers from his necessary choice. Since he is human, he makes a human decision, but he is shocked to see clearly the gap between human and divine laws.

At the time of Billy's execution and funeral, strange human murmurs occur among shipmates, who subconsciously feel the mercilessness of the martial law and the profound loss of their splendid brother. Billy's innocence has impressed them, and they aspire for that universal value. Some sailors convey the story of Billy's life, and his purity and excellent humanity are symbolically elevated to the level of myth. The tragedy of Billy is in his sacrifice for the necessity of human responsibility towards earthly law; and his life shows, if necessary, that even the heavenly law must succumb to the earthly law.

Billy's life and death ultimately reaffirms the truth of human and heavenly values. Good and evil always coexist as examined in Melville's other works, and in *Billy Budd* the symbolical embodiments of them in Billy and Claggart display such coexistence, which is finally balanced in their fateful death. Billy destroys the snake of evil, but he is bitten at the ankle and doomed to die. With respect to Melville's achievement in *Billy Budd*, Matthiessen says:

In his steady handling here of his old distinction between earthly truth and heavenly truth, between horologicals and chronometricals, Melville has gained a balance that was lacking to his angry defiance in *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*. Vere obeys the law, yet understands the deeper reality of the spirit. Billy instinctively accepts the captain's duty, and forgives him. Melville affirms the rareness of such forgiveness by means of the double image in which the sudden raising of Billy on the halter becomes also his ascension into heaven . . .<sup>8</sup>

This passage is brilliantly told, and Matthiessen is astute in focusing on Billy's forgiveness.

Lawrence Thompson considers Melville's novels from *Typee* (1846) to *Pierre* (1852) as the seven types of narrative revealing the writer's disillusionment.<sup>9</sup> This critic asserts that the novels signify the loss of Eden in alliance with the emergence of evil and man's endless search for truth and happiness. Specifically, Thompson notices in *Redburn* (1849) a young man's disillusionment in his initial contact with the reality of the world, and likewise in *Moby-Dick* (1851) he sees Ahab's religious disillusionment. Though this critic does not mention *Billy Budd* in his essay, it may be possible, following his opinion, to find some kind of disillusionment also in the novel. The point, however, is that the disillusionment is to some degree overcome in the last novel. At the last stage of his literary career, Melville seems to have attained a sort of salvation.

How did Melville actually deal with his disillusionment in his novels? In *Typee*, for instance, a hero who escaped to the Typees at first realizes the "happy valley" of the primitive tribes as idealistic, discovering happiness and comfort; gradually, however, he begins to have doubt about the life of the valley, and he tries to get away from there. He realizes that he has escaped from the reality of the civilized world, and he finds himself longing for a civilized life. His disillusionment is not about the life of the valley but about his modernness: he cannot help feeling that he does not belong there. Interestingly, as he gets out of the valley, the hero begins to wish to return to it, which seem to indicate that man always searches for an Eden, which is difficult to attain on this earth.

Also, disillusionment is the main subject of *Mardi* (1848). Taji goes through a series of disillusionment in search of his beloved Yillah—a symbol of happiness and love for him. Sometimes, his hope in the adventure and his love towards Yillah are almost obsessive that his quest appears to be the result of his own perpetual idealism. His search seems to be a romantic idealism of his egotism, and he refuses to be disillusioned in his belief of the possibility of discovering his love. On one hand, his quest becomes an assertion of dream and will, and on the other it looks pathetic, since it is an endless search.

In *Moby-Dick*, again, Melville reveals the reality of human despair and disillusionment in the truth of the universe. Describing the maniac egoism of Captain Ahab, who tries to penetrate the pasteboard mask of the universe, Melville shows Ahab's disillusionment in the reality of the whole universe. Ahab thinks that behind the superficial appearance of the universe actually lurks the fact of evil, and against which he struggles to strike. In this truly and romantic novel Melville examines the conflicting realities between the assertion of man's free will and the predetermined nature of the whole universe, good and evil, love and hate, reason and passion, time and eternity, light and darkness, nature and society. And in this examination Melville discovers that the human condition is doomed to be disillusioned in the unfriendly universe.

In *Clarel* (1876), also, Melville deals with disillusionment, yet this time in a more reconciliatory tone. The poem displays Clarel's quest for the meaning of life—love, happiness, and truth—in conjunction with Christian moral values. In his search Clarel constantly fluctuates between doubt and belief about the definiteness of the divine values; yet, finally, he realizes that only religious belief will wipe off his doubt, and he acquires the vision of eternity.

In a way, *Billy Budd* is an allegorical version of *Clarel*. The novel is Melville's final statement about his notion of the relationship between the universe and man, treating the matters of eternal conflicts between earthly and heavenly values; and it succeeds in balancing his disillusionment and hope, cynicism and idealism, negation and affirmation. Max J. Herzberg says:

Melville's own intellectual life, buoyed as it was by the faith that "death but routs life into victory," ended on this note of potentially religious affirmation; and as he had come to accept this essentially Christian position, so he had renounced the romantic egotism of his youth and prime.<sup>10</sup>

Melville's final resolution does not seem to be the reconciliation of the contraries but his acceptance of fate; it may be rather a resigned, religious acknowledgment based upon faith of the truths of the universe and God. The human and universal strife between

the contraries that Melville explores in his earlier works results in *Billy Budd*, revealing his ultimate reconciliation with the reality of the universe.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> William H. Shurr, "The Art of Poetry and *Billy Budd*," *The Mystery of Iniquity: Melville as Poet, 1857-91*, (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1972), p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> Merlin Bowen, *The Long Encounter*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963), p. 221.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Miller, Jr., *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales*, (New York: Signet, 1979), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1941), pp. 509-510.

<sup>7</sup> Melville, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> Matthiessen, pp. 511-12.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Thompson, "Eden Revisited," *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's "Typee"*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston: G. K. Hall and Company, 1982), pp. 107-16.

<sup>10</sup> Max J. Herzberg, ed., *The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), p. 576.

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