RELIGIOUS ALLEGORY IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S BILLY BUDD

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Viewed as a religious allegory, Herman Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor[1] admits to three general interpretations: man's initiation into evil through Satan's successful temptation of Adam; Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac; and Christ's self-sacrifice, undertaken to cleanse man of original sin. Although evidence in the text may be construed, with varying degrees of correctness, to corroborate any one of the three views, most of it indicates that in Billy Budd Melville was presenting the story of Christ's sacrifice in contemporary terms.

In the thesis I shall offer evidence, derived from the text, to prove that Captain Vere represents Pontius Pilate, Claggart represents Satan, and that Billy Budd is the Christ image whose death and "ascension" imply the potential salvation of man and the affirmation of a meaningful religious order in the world.

Those who seek insight into Billy Budd must read a substantial amount of critical material that is often more confusing

[1]The text used for this thesis is that contained in Melville's Billy Budd and the Critics, ed. William T. Stafford (Belmont, California, 1966). Stafford prefers the title of Billy Budd, Sailor to Billy Budd, Foretopman because Melville crossed out the latter title in his manuscript and inserted the former in the upper corner of the first page. Hereafter the work will be referred to as Billy Budd. Page numbers for citations from Billy Budd will be enclosed in parentheses and embodied in the text.

than enlightening. Since its posthumous publication in 1924, Billy Budd has aroused a critical dissension which has not subsided. Those seeking critical guidance will read that Billy Budd is a transcendence of innocence over tragedy; that it urges acceptance of the inscrutable laws of the universe; that it is an American version of Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained; that it is a study of phenomenal human behavior; that it is a repetition of the Christian myth of Adam's original sin and subsequent fall; that it is a retelling of Christ's sacrifice and ascension; that it is a final and positive re-affirmation of Christianity; that it is an ironic comedy which mocks and negates every aspect of Christianity; that it is a social allegory which criticizes social inequities; and that it is a depiction of the struggle between morality and expediency.

In the following pages I shall explore the criticism of Billy Budd and then examine the work itself to discuss the total religious allegory for meaning, coherence, and completeness. I shall trace each element, where possible, to the Bible or other religion-related sources. This study will focus on Billy Budd, with minimal concern for its relationship to Melville's other works.

CHAPTER II

THE TANGLED WORLD OF THE CRITICS

Perhaps the most logical place to begin when reviewing the criticism of Billy Budd is with E. L. Grant Watson, who wrote in 1933 what was probably the first penetrating study of the novel.[1] To Watson, Billy Budd is a "testament of acceptance"[2] which reconciles the religious struggles evidenced in Melville's earlier works.

> And as the philosophy in it has grown from that of rebellion to that of acceptance, as the symbolic figures of unconscious forces have become always more concrete and objective, so we may assume that these hints are intentional, and that Melville was particularly conscious of what he was doing.[3]

Watson believes that Melville reached some sort of religious reconciliation and that Billy Budd is an intentional manifestation of this reconciliation.

Ronald Mason also views Billy Budd as an epistle of acceptance in which "the old ingredients of doubt and fear have, almost mysteriously, disappeared."[4] To Mason the novel is an affirmation

[1]E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," The New England Quarterly, VI (June, 1933), 319-327, reprinted in Stafford, pp. 74-78.

[2]Watson, p. 74.

[3]Watson, p. 77.

[4]Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville (London, 1951), p. 246.

of Christianity in which the death of Billy, who is a Christ figure, marks the triumph of innocence:

> The Christian conception of love, which partakes not only of understanding and forgiveness, but of acceptance and evil which transcends and converts that evil to creative good, has at last been absorbed into Melville's imaginative vision. It marks the final victory of innocence, before which all assailants are powerless and all distractions vain.[5]

Mason contends that although Billy dies, his death does not make the novel tragic. Billy's "reinforced innocence" allows him to accept his fate and transcend it.[6]

To Norman Holmes Pearson and John Freeman, Billy Budd echoes Miltonic themes. Pearson argues that Melville's purpose "was to try to give in as universalized a way as possible . . . another redaction of the myth which had concerned Milton in the trilogy of his three major works."[7] According to Pearson, Melville compresses Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes in Billy Budd to achieve the desired effect. Man falls from grace, Christ redeems him, and man subsequently attains salvation.[8] Freeman, however, identifies Billy Budd as a sequel to Moby Dick, just as Paradise Regained is a concluding companion to Paradise Lost.[9]

[5]Mason, p. 258.

[6]Mason, p. 256.

[7]Norman Holmes Pearson, "Billy Budd: 'The King's Yarn,'" American Quarterly, III (Summer, 1951), 107.

[8]Pearson, pp. 99-114.

[9]John Freeman, Herman Melville (New York, 1926), p. 131.

William Braswell interprets Billy Budd as "an inside narrative about a tragic conflict in Melville's own spiritual life."[10] To Braswell the novel is a testament of acceptance which

> counseled resignation to the inscrutable laws of the universe. Deeply as man may be grieved by the rigid and sometimes merciless working of these laws, his duty is to accept them. In this narrative about a common sailor, whose execution reminds one in certain obvious ways of the crucifixion, the effect on Melville of the miraculous beauty of Christ's goodness is as apparent as in anything else he ever wrote.[11]

Rudolf von Abele advances a similar theory which contends that Billy Budd is Melville's solution to the problem of evil and his reconciliation with God's laws and the world.[12]

Wendell Glick and Warner Berthoff offer interpretations that appear to be generally outside the realm of allegory, yet they acknowledge the plausibility of Billy Budd as a religious allegory. Glick states that "although it is much more, Billy Budd is the cogent fruition of a lifetime of observation and study of the eternal conflict between absolute morality and social expediency . . . ."[13] Glick explains Vere's decision to execute Billy as a complex moral decision which

[10] William Braswell, "Melville's Billy Budd as 'An Inside Narrative,'" American Literature, XXIX (May, 1957), 133.

[11] William Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought: An Essay In Interpretation (Durham, 1943), pp. 123-124.

[12] Rudolf von Abele, "Melville and the Problem of Evil," American Mercury, LXV (November, 1947), 598.

[13] Wendell Glick, "Expediency and Absolute Morality In Billy Budd," PMLA, LXVIII (March, 1953), 103.

affirms "the utilitarian principle of social expediency"[14] instead of "an absolute moral code"[15] which is based on human sympathy. To Berthoff, Billy Budd is a definition of "certain specific and contingent examples of being and behavior"[16] which stresses the "magnanimity"[17] of Billy and Vere. Berthoff explains this "magnanimity" as "a certain dimension of spirit which the virtuous man may rise to and which any moral event may conceivably participate in."[18] This quality binds Billy and Vere together, and it allows Billy to accept his fate while prohibiting Vere from feeling remorse.

Frederick W. Dillistone views Billy Budd as a repetition of the Passion Story in the Gospels. He believes that in the novel Melville

> does not accept the Biblical witness to the Divine reconciliation in any straightforward and obvious way. But it is impossible to overlook the delicate connections between his own symbolic language and that of the Bible and above all it is scarcely possible to follow the career of Billy Budd without being reminded

[14]Glick, p. 106.

[15]Glick, p. 106.

[16]Warner Berthoff, "'Certain Phenomenal Men': The Example of Billy Budd," ELH, XXVII (December, 1960), 335.

[17]Warner Berthoff, The Example of Melville (Princeton, 1962), p. 197.

[18]Ibid., p. 198.

> of the career of Another, without, in short, recalling the main stages of the Passion Story.[19]

Dillistone stresses Melville's Calvinistic upbringing as the primary influence on his version of the Passion Story. Melville was saturated with Calvinist tradition, and this tradition became the basis for Billy Budd. Dillistone identifies Billy as the Christ figure, since "only an innocent victim, in the Calvinist view, could take the place of the guilty and die in their stead. Only a sinless offering could make due satisfaction to God's righteous judgment on human sin."[20] Billy embodies these qualities. He is innocent and sinless; therefore he is a worthy sacrificial victim and his self-sacrifice is acceptable to God. Through his death man's natural depravity, derived from Adam's original sin, will be erased.

Claggart, usually identified as the Satanic image in the novel, is, to Dillistone, a symbol of original sin.[21] When Billy strikes Claggart and causes his death, he is, in effect, destroying the Calvinistic doctrine of natural depravity. After Billy accomplishes his divine mission, he passively submits to his execution to allow the expurgation to become complete. If one accepts Dillistone's identification of Claggart as a symbol of original sin, one may justifiably wonder why the execution is necessary if the divine

[19] Frederick W. Dillistone, The Novelist and the Passion Story (New York, 1960), p. 47.

[20] Dillistone, p. 63.

[21] Dillistone, p. 62.

plan to rid man of natural depravity has been carried out. The execution, or self-sacrifice, is unnecessary if the burden of innate guilt has been relieved.

To Dillistone Captain Vere is a symbol of God who is depicted in a manner which embodies the Puritan ideal. "For the Calvinist the supreme reality was the God who had established the universe by His righteous decrees and whose laws were inviolable."[22] Since Melville hints at a father-son relationship between Billy and Vere, and Vere sympathizes fully with Billy, Dillistone concludes that the captain is a symbol of God. Dillistone, however, overlooks Vere's role as a subordinate who is pledged to uphold the "inviolable" laws. He did not originate them or create them. He does not decree; he merely obeys. Dillistone's view also ignores Vere's death. If one accepts Vere as God, the captain's death paradoxically implies that God is dead. This hypothesis is not compatible with the interpretation of Billy Budd as a repetition of the Passion Story, since its incongruity makes any attempt to reconstruct the religious allegory a meaningless, unanswerable paradox.

Nathalia Wright regards Billy Budd as a reconstruction of the Crucifixion,[23] basing her theory on Melville's religious upbringing and his familiarity with the Bible and other religious sources.

[22]Dillistone, p. 56.

[23]Nathalia Wright, "Biblical Allusion in Melville's Prose," American Literature, XII (May, 1940), 193.

To Miss Wright, Billy is a Christ figure, although she admits that he may also be Adam.

> In one sense Budd is simple nature, a barbarian, "Adam . . . ere the urban Serpent wiggled himself into his company." Yet his innocence is more than that of a natural man, completely unarmed in the world. It is a divine innocence, incorruptible by society or the forces of darkness.[24]

As Miss Wright points out, Billy cannot be Adam completely. Billy, unlike Adam, is not overcome by evil; he conquers it. His innocence, which exceeds that of man, is of a divine nature which makes him immune to the forces of evil which seek to distract him from his purpose of redeeming man.

Captain Vere, to Miss Wright, is a curious symbol of God and Pilate. She does not state explicitly which role she favors, but her study seems to indicate that Vere is God:

> But Billy Budd sees Captain Vere face to face, and finds at the heart of creation the warmth of personality. This is, of course, easily recognizable as a New Testament idea of the nature of the universe, presided over by a fatherly god. But Melville read something more than this into the Crucifixion story. There he found one more illustration for his notion that beyond the farthest known truth there is yet an untrodden realm, an undisclosed mystery. Unlike Jehovah in the Old Testament, God the Father seems to practice as well as to command obedience; hence his enigmatical willingness for Jesus to die. And so in Billy Budd even he who administers the law is bound by it. It is the fact that Vere did not formulate the Mutiny Act which makes

[24]Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham, 1949), p. 128.

> possible the community of spirit between him and Billy Budd. Both are subject to a power beyond themselves.[25]

Although Miss Wright's theory is convincing, it does not satisfactorily explain Vere's role as God. If God is the Supreme Being, as in Christian theology, He cannot be held accountable to any other power. If the god with whom Vere is identified is not supreme, he cannot be the omnipotent Christian God. Since there is an "untrodden realm" beyond Vere, such attempts to identify him as God must be designated as incomplete, and must be considered failures.

Although Miss Wright recognizes Claggart as "the spiritual antithesis of Billy,"[26] she does not identify him as Satan but views him as a Judas figure.

> Though he is not a creature of the secondary or auxiliary nature of Judas, Claggart is as effective a betrayer of an innocent man to authority. His first attempt is by bribery: he has a seaman offer Billy two guineas to join a proposed mutiny group. When that temptation is withstood, Claggart falsely charges that Billy is disloyal to the king.[27]

As Miss Wright admits, Claggart is not a subordinate figure; his role, therefore, must be greater than that of Judas. Unlike Judas, Claggart is an originator of evil whose wickedness is innate and

[25]Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible, p. 134.

[26]Ibid., p. 129.

[27]Ibid., p. 130.

uncompromising. The careful language with which Melville describes him and his actions clearly mark him as a Satanic symbol.

F. O. Matthiessen and R. W. B. Lewis regard Billy Budd as a contemporary rendition of Satan's temptation of Adam. Matthiessen stresses Billy's natural innocence, his primitive strength and beauty, and his ignorance of worldly affairs as indicative Adamic traits.[28] Billy is "young Adam before the Fall"[29] whose natural innocence arouses the envious hatred of Claggart, and his killing the master-at-arms is a succumbing to temptation that must result in his death. Vere, "the wise Father, terribly severe but righteous,"[30] cannot tolerate this transgression, although he clearly sympathizes with Billy. The young sailor forgives his executor, and thereby "ascends" into heaven, executed by man but pardoned by God.

Although Matthiessen's theory is interesting, it does not fulfill the demands of the religious allegory. Billy, as Adam, yields to temptation and is punished for his violation, but his punishment is not similar to that of Adam, who was expelled from Paradise. Billy, when executed, leaves the microcosmic world of the Indomitable, a setting totally unlike the legendary Garden of

[28] F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression In the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 501.

[29] Matthiessen, p. 509.

[30] Matthiessen, p. 510.

Eden. The absence of an Eve in Melville's novel is another requirement of the Adamic allegory which Matthiessen's interpretation does not satisfy.

Lewis views Billy as a "scapegoat hero"[31] whose sacrifice atones for man's sins. Like Matthiessen, Lewis construes Billy's striking of Claggart as a submission to temptation. As an innocent scapegoat who accepts unjust execution, Billy will alleviate the sins of the world. This conception contains a fundamental error; Christ, not Adam, is the sacrificial victim whose death purges the world of original sin. Further objections to this view are the same as those raised against Matthiessen's theory. The Adamic conception, therefore, must be partially discounted because it cannot comply with the demands of the allegory. Both of these critics, however, do realize that in some way Billy's death is a reaffirmation of life and an exorcising force.

To Newton Arvin, Billy is a curious combination of Adam and Isaac. The young sailor falls from grace, but in his role as a sacrificial lamb he attains salvation for himself and man. "For the tale of the Handsome Sailor . . . has an archetypal depth and scope that no reader can quite mistake; it is Melville's version of the Fall of Man, the loss of Paradise."[32] Billy, however, does not fall; he conquers his adversary. He does not lose Paradise; through his

[31]Richard W. B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago, 1955), p. 151.

[32]Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 294.

death he sheds his earthly existence and departs from a world to which Adam was sent as a disciplinary measure. Adam, moreover, disobeyed God's will, whereas Billy's transgression is only a violation of human law. Arvin also states that "the sacrifice of Billy by Captain Vere is a re-enactment of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, though it is a completed one."[33] Although this view conveniently reconciles the hints of the father-son relationship between Billy and Vere in the novel, the parallel which it draws cannot be justified. Although both are obedient to those who ordain the sacrifice, Isaac's death does not occur, whereas Billy's does.

Perhaps the most striking view of Billy Budd is that of the critics who interpret the novel as an ironic repudiation of God and Calvinism. The views of Lawrance Thompson, one of the most outspoken of such critics, will serve as a representative example. Melville's purpose in Billy Budd, Thompson believes, was to "hoodwink and deceive"[34] the reader into believing that the novel is an affirmative statement. To the perceptive reader, Thompson suggests, this bitter irony is apparent:

> A third viewpoint, represented by any reader who can transcend the bias of his own prejudices, is slyly encouraged by Melville to view the story as a bitter comedy, in the satiric and sarcastic tradition of Lucian and Voltaire and Tom Paine.[35]

[33]Arvin, p. 296.

[34]Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel With God (Princeton, 1952), p. 414.

[35]Thompson, p. 356.

Thompson identifies Billy as Christ, Claggart as Satan, and Vere as God, but his classification of them is unique in that it names Claggart, whose being is governed by "natural depravity," as an agent of God:

> While the narrator blandly expands the definition, however, the alert reader makes his own computation in terms of Melville's sinister frame of reference: a depravity according to nature has its source in nature, or in the source of the source: in God. Natural depravity is thus an emblem of Divine Depravity.[36]

Although Claggart initiates the working of evil against Billy, he is not ultimately responsible for his actions. He is merely an agent of God, a pawn used to carry out God's vengeance on man.

Vere, to Thompson, is an image of a God who punished man severely for any transgressions of His law:

> The story perfectly illustrates what happens, in life, when an Adam-like innocent-ignorant such as Billy runs afoul of that selfishly severe letter-of-the-law discipline for which the Heavenly ("Starry") Creator (Fair-fax) God (Vere: Truth) is notorious.[37]

This interpretation identifies Vere as the God who harshly thwarts man's innocent violation of what in this instance is interpreted as divine law. The ironic climax occurs when Billy is executed. Unlike other critics, Thompson views this incident as the final mockery of God and the ultimate "hoodwinking" of the reader:

[36] Thompson, p. 356.

[37] Thompson, pp. 369-370.

> Allegorically, Melville implies, this is the fraud of God, and hence the ironic appropriateness of the pun implicit in the symbolism of the sky: "a soft glory as the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision." If we are inclined to think of the verb "fleece" as merely modern slang, we can find from the dictionary that it has long been a verb in good standing; that it means (1) "To sheer (sheep)" or (2) "To strip off money or property by fraud; despoil."[38]

Thompson's bold interpretations, although interesting, rely too much on verbal gymnastics to be completely valid. Richard Harter Fogle, who also views Billy Budd as an ironic work, has pointed out that to accept such a theory "would render Melville a crafty masochist and madman."[39] Other objections may be raised against Thompson's theory. If one accepts Thompson's view that Claggart is an agent of God, one overlooks the Miltonic echoes in the characterization of the master-at-arms. Although Thompson equates Vere with Truth and, finally, with God, the captain's name indicates more literally that he is vir, or man, as Richard Chase suggests.[40] Thompson declares that Billy Budd is an allegory, yet he identifies both Vere and the king as symbols for God, and such an assertion of dual deity renders the allegorical parallel ambiguous. In his interpretation of the death scene, Thompson ignores the literal religious connotation of such words as "glory," "fleece," and "Lamb of God." The term "glory" obviously

[38] Thompson, p. 408.

[39] Richard Harter Fogle, "Billy Budd-Acceptance or Irony," Tulane Studies in English, VIII (1958), 107.

[40] Richard Chase, "Innocence and Infamy," Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York, 1949), reprinted in Literature in Critical Perspectives, ed. Walter K. Gordon (New York, 1968), p. 743.

implies divinity, while the word "fleece" is more properly interpreted as a noun. The phrase "Lamb of God" is the key to the passage, since it signifies salvation and deliverance in addition to symbolizing the sacrificial victim.

The world of the critics of Billy Budd is full of disparate views. Most of their arguments may be substantiated by evidence from the text, but some of them overlook significant details which are crucial to interpretation of the novel.

CHAPTER III

BACKGROUND AND SOURCES

Melville had employed the allegorical method in earlier works. Mardi, Moby-Dick,[1] Pierre, The Confidence-Man, and Clarel are all examples of the deliberate or unconscious use of allegory. In Billy Budd the use of allegory is particularly appropriate to the religious subject. Conforming to the allegorical tradition, the novel induces parallel interest in the plot itself and the impressions it conveys of the religious story of Christ's crucifixion. The major characters in the novel are depicted according to the method of allegorical personification: Claggart, who represents Satan, is also a personified symbol of evil; Billy, who represents Christ, is a symbol of innocence; Vere is both a representation of Pilate and a personification of rational obedience to human law. To construct an effective allegory, Melville created an interesting plot and blended it with Biblical connotations and overtones of other religion-related sources.

Perhaps the work which influenced Melville the most was the Bible. It was the earliest source with which he became acquainted,

[1]Melville wrote to Sophia Hawthorne on January 8, 1852, that Moby-Dick may be construed as an allegory, although he did not make it such consciously. "I had some vague idea while writing it, that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that parts of it were - but the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr. Hawthorne's letter, which, without citing any particular examples, yet initimated the part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole." The Letters of Herman Melville, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven, 1960), pp. 144-145.

and its influence is evident throughout his works. Over fourteen hundred references to Biblical characters, places, occurrences, and books may be found in his works, and more than one hundred are evident in Billy Budd.[2] Several Bibles were owned by his family.[3] Melville's copy, and the family Bible, are marked extensively in appropriate places, and many of these marked passages are referred to in his works. The Book of Psalms is marked seventy-seven times; Matthew is marked fifty-two times; Isaiah, fifty-one; John, forty-seven; and Job, forty-five.[4] Melville, however, did not subscribe literally to the religious dogma in the Bible. As Nathalia Wright has remarked, he went beyond the literal to seek "what was for him the true religious significance of the Bible: its mythology, or its allegorical representation of metaphysical sources."[5]

The theme of redemption embodied in the Gospels is evident, in different degrees, in all of Melville's works, culminating finally in Billy Budd. Melville was preoccupied with the New Testament's

[2]Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible, p. 8.

[3]Merton M. Sealts, Jr., Melville's Reading: A Checklist of Books Owned and Borrowed (Milwaukee, 1966), p. 40, items 60-65. Melville's copy was the authorized King James edition published in 1846. Citations from the Bible in the text will be from the King James version published by Lippincott, Grambo and Company (Philadelphia, 1850). References to the Bible will be enclosed in parentheses hereafter and included in the text.

[4]Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible, p. 10.

[5]Ibid., p. 16.

conflict of good and evil which reached its climax in Christ's crucifixion, and this preoccupation became the theme of Billy Budd. He seems to have drawn chiefly on the Book of Matthew for the allegorical background of the novel, although the Books of Luke, John, and Mark were also used. Billy Budd is an allegorical representation of Christ's struggle to purge man of original sin and cleanse the world of innate evil, as it is depicted in the Gospels, but Melville's protagonist exceeds the limitations of a historical Christ. Miss Wright's estimation is correct:

> No strictly historical Jesus, as revealed by the Markian tradition, could be as moving as what the mind had made of him; a perfect nature, the idealism of whose ethic commanded adoration if not limitation. So he appears on all Melville's pages, a symbol of the state to which man aspires.[6]

Billy is a figurative Christ image, conceived in the mind instead of through historical fact. Thus he transcends historical limitation to represent the essence of the theme of the Gospels: man's redemption and subsequent salvation.

Melville's upbringing in a family steeped in the tenets of Calvinist tradition also had a profound effect on his writing. Both of his parents were raised according to Calvinist principles and they seemed to have reared their children in a similar manner. Braswell stresses Melville's upbringing as a major influence on his attitude toward religion.

[6]Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible, p. 18.

> The sturdy faith of Melville's family and some of his friends can hardly be overemphasized as an influence on his religious thought. Their belief in life after death, their conviction that God controls all for the best, were ever-present reminders of his earlier unquestioning faith.[7]

As he matured, Melville's religious thought reflected his uneasiness with Calvinistic ideals, ethics, and practices; and his works reflect the dissatisfaction with Calvinism and a search for tangible, meaningful religious significance, finally found and appropriately reconciled in Billy Budd.

Melville was familiar with other religion-related sources, such as the Apocrypha, John Kitto's Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature, the works of Christian theologians, including Calvin, and he had some knowledge of oriental religions and philosophies, stoicism, deism, and skepticism.[8] All of the influences on him, however, were not strictly religious. Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Spenser, Carlyle, and other literary masters had a powerful effect on Melville which is evidenced in his works. Melville owned copies of the works of these writers, and the number of marks and notations he made in the volumes indicates that he was thoroughly acquainted with them.

Although Melville did not read Shakespeare seriously until he was twenty-nine, the works of the English dramatist affected

[7]Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought, p. 8.

[8]See Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought, pp. 12-16.

him greatly. In a letter to Evert Duyckinck Melville stated:

> Dolt & ass that I am I have lived more than 29 years, & until a few days ago, never made close acquaintance with the divine William. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. I fancy that this mount (?) Shakespeare in heaven ranks with Gabriel Raphael and Michael. And if another Messiah ever comes twill be in Shakespeare's person.[9]

Melville's insistence on the method of having external appearances correspond with internal qualities is largely derived from Shakespeare. This method of characterization is evident in the description of the Handsome Sailor in the first chapter in Billy Budd, in which Melville states that "the moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make" (p. 4). Melville's creation of Claggart might be a partial echo of Shakespeare's Iago, whose evil nature seemed to be aroused most when he recognized uncorrupted virtue in others.[10]

After the Bible, the major influence on Melville's creation of Billy Budd was that of Milton, whose allegorical personifications, illustrated in the characterization of Sin and Death in Paradise Lost, seemed to have some significance for Melville. Milton's characterization of Satan in Paradise Lost is reflected significantly in Melville's portrayal of Claggart. According to Henry F. Pommer,

[9]Letter from Melville to Evert Duyckinck, quoted in Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible, p. 3.

[10]F. O. Matthiessen, The American Renaissance, p. 435. Matthiessen provides a detailed study of Shakespeare's influence on Melville, particularly in Moby-Dick, on pp. 412-435.

> The automatism of Claggart's evil, the serpent imagery of his book, the allusions to Satan and the quotations from Milton, the envy aroused by Billy's beauty of body and character, the incipient love and actual suffering in Claggart's soul, and his misleading appearance determine his position as the ultimate development of Satanic villainy in Melville.[11]

Equally important is the parallel that may be drawn between the similar themes of Milton's Paradise Regained and Billy Budd. Each work is a symbolic representation of man's redemption from original sin and the convincing triumph of divine goodness over evil.

[11] Henry F. Pommer, Milton and Melville (Pittsburgh, 1950), p. 89.

CHAPTER IV

BILLY AS THE CHRIST IMAGE

In Billy Budd Melville reiterates the ordeal of Christ's self-sacrifice which was undertaken to rid man of the innate guilt inherited from Adam's original sin and to provide man with the chance for salvation. Using Biblical parallels and Miltonic methods, Melville employs the characters in the novel to reaffirm the legitimacy of God's universal law. Melville creates the three major figures in the novel in the allegorical method of dual characterization; each of the characters is a literal figure, yet each is also an allegorical figure in respect to Christian theology and a representation of an abstract quality of the human condition. Billy is a realistic Christ figure as well as an allegorical and symbolic personification of natural innocence. The religious allegory of the novel prevails through his death and subsequent "ascension," implying that man has been saved and cleansed of original sin.

If Billy Budd is thought of as an allegorical rendition of Christ's crucifixion, Melville's purpose in the novel becomes similar to that of Milton in Paradise Regained. In the introductory verses to Book I of this poem Milton stated:

> I who erewhile the happy Garden sung,
> By one man's disobedience lost, now sing
> Recover'd Paradise to all mankind,
> By one man's firm obedience fully tried
> Through all temptation, and the Tempter foil'd

> In all his wiles, defeated and repuls't,
> And Eden rais'd in the waste Wilderness.[1]

This statement resembles a passage in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

> For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.
> Therefore as by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.
> For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. (Romans 5: 17-19)

Billy is the "one man" who obeys firmly and resists temptation. He confronts Claggart, the Tempter, rebuffs him, and conquers him, thereby freeing this newly raised Eden from innate evil. Melville established the religious tone of the novel in its opening sentence, in which he states that

> the year 1797, the year of the narrative, belongs to a period which . . . involved a crisis for Christendom not exceeded in its undetermined momentousness at the time by any other era whereof there is record. The opening proposition made by the Spirit of that Age involved rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs. (p. 3)

The pattern established in this passage is explicit: a religious crisis which must be resolved exists in the world. The crisis

[1]John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), III, lines 1-7. All citations from Milton in this thesis will be from this work. Hereafter references to Milton will be enclosed in parentheses and embodied in the text.

is not exceeded by any other in the annals of Christian history, and the existing situation may be as acute as that in the period during which Christ lived. The last sentence in the passage is highly indicative of the essence of the religious tone of the allegory. The phrase "Spirit of the Age," taken in the religious context which it distinctly suggests, refers to God, the Spirit of all ages in Christian tradition. The phrase "Old World's hereditary wrongs" is a clear reference to Adam's original sin which had doomed man prior to Christ's coming. In this religious sense, the Spirit's "proposition" is one which will atone for Adam's sin.

Melville extended the religious pattern to make it more specific through the construction of the Christ-disciple image in the first chapter, and this extension intimates that the Christ figure is the "proposition" which will rectify man's inherited sin. Speaking of the "Handsome Sailor," Melville states that

> with no perceptible trace of the vainglorious about him, rather with the off-hand unaffectedness of natural regality, he seemed to accept the spontaneous homage of his shipmates. . . . In Liverpool, now a half a century ago I saw under the shadow of the great dingy street-wall of Prince's Dock . . . a common sailor, so intensely black that he must needs have been a native African of the unadulterate blood of Ham. (pp. 3-4)

This passage defines the image of Christ which is reflected comprehensively in Billy. The black sailor is not "vainglorious"

and he possesses "natural regality"; Christ was not egotistical or proud and he, too, possessed "natural regality" in the sense that his regality was inborn. Other similarities between the black sailor and Christ are readily evident. The black sailor is a "common sailor," and Christ was a common carpenter. The sailor is "of the unadulterate blood of Ham," or a pure descendant of the Biblical ancestor of negroid races. Christ is a Jew of pure descent; he is, in this sense, the untainted Jew of Jews. The sailor is black, and this color, a universal symbol of death, foreshadows the inevitable sacrifice that will occur. Since the Christ figure must submit to his ordained death if he is to accomplish his divine purpose, the sailor is portrayed as being black to stress the sacrificial theme which will yield a contrasting light that will exorcise the original sin which damns humanity.

Further descriptions of the sailor and his companions delineate the skillfully established Christ pattern:

> In jovial sallies right and left, his white teeth flashing into view, he rollicked along, the centre of a company of his shipmates. These were made up of such an assortment of tribes and complexions as would have well fitted them to be marched up by Anacharsis Cloots before the bar of the first French Assembly as Representatives of the Human Race. (p. 4)

The black sailor is, like Christ, the dominant figure of the group in which he moves. His followers have different racial and social backgrounds, much like Christ's followers who came from various

regions of Palestine and neighboring areas. A verse from the book of Matthew, the Gospel which Melville marked most, depicts a relationship between Christ and those who followed him which resembles that of the black sailor and his group.

> And Jesus went all about Galilee . . . and there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordon. (Matthew 4: 23-25)

The varied backgrounds of the sailor's followers become equally significant when applied to the analogy with Anacharsis Cloots, who was described in Carlyle's The French Revolution as a "Speaker of Mankind."[2] Cloots appeared before the French Assembly accompanied by various specimens of humanity, much like those who surrounded Christ and the black sailor.

> Enough, that the 19th evening of June, 1790, the sun's slant rays lighted a spectacle such as one foolish little Planet has not often had to show: Anacharsis Clootz entering the august Salle de Manege, with the Human Species at his heels. Swedes, Spaniards, Polacks, Turks, Chaldeans, Greeks, dwellers in Mesopotamia; behold them all; they have come to claim a place in the grand Federation.[3]

Translated into a religious context, the ideals of Cloots resembled those of Christ. As Carlyle states, "this is the faith of Anacharsis:

[2]Sealts, in Melville's Reading, lists works of Carlyle among the books Melville owned or borrowed (pp. 47-48). This description of Cloots, or Clootz, is cited from Thomas Carlyle, The French Revolution (New York, Harper, n.d.), II, 188.

[3]Carlyle, I, 331-332.

that there is a Paradise discoverable; that all costumes ought to hold men. . . . 'Our Ambassador titles,' said the fervid Clootz, 'are not written on parchment, but on the living hearts of all men.'"[4] The statement of Clootz resembles Christ's message. Love, contained in the "hearts of all men," is the universal "costume" which unites humanity. Melville uses the stories of the black sailor and Baron Cloots to stress the identity of Billy as Christ figure, a speaker for all mankind.

In the preliminary passage describing the "handsome sailor" (p. 4), Melville states that

> invariably a proficient in his perilous calling, he was also more or less of a mighty boxer or wrestler. It was strength and beauty. Tales of his prowess were cited. Ashore he was the champion; afloat the spokesman; on every suitable occasion always foremost. (p. 4)

Although this description has little in common with the Sunday School conception of a meek and mild Savior, it does project an image of the virile, powerful Christ, the carpenter's son used to working with his hands, strong enough to carry a heavy wooden cross, and, in righteous wrath, capable of meting out physical punishment. The qualities of strength and natural beauty found in the handsome sailor are also important characteristics in Billy. Melville goes a significant step further in the general description of the handsome sailor when he states that "the moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make" (p. 4). This statement suggests that the internal strength of character and high standard of

[4]Carlyle, I, 305-332.

morality which Christ possessed are primary features of the handsome sailor. These introductory passages establish the foundation for Melville's Christ image: he is a "champion" and a "spokesman," he is a leader of a group whose members have various backgrounds, his death is foreshadowed, and he possesses the necessary masculine strength which is vital to his role.

Billy exceeds the requirements for the Christ figure set forth in the preliminary passages. "Such a cynosure, at least in aspect, and something such too in nature, though with important variations made apparent as the story proceeds, was welkin-eyed Billy Budd" (p. 4). Billy, therefore, displays the basic qualities that are evident in the Christ-black sailor image. Billy's identification as Christ is crucial to any allegorical interpretation of the novel. Since he resists temptation and is not expelled from an Eden, he cannot represent Adam. He is not Isaac, the son of Abraham, since divine intervention prohibits the occurrence of Isaac's sacrifice. He must be Christ, the son of man and God who contains the characteristics of all men and their Creator. In Paradise Lost, Milton states this thought precisely in one of God's addresses to Christ:

> Thou therefore whom thou only canst redeem,
> Thir Nature also to thy Nature join;
> And be thyself Man among men on Earth,
> Made flesh . . . of Virgin seed,
> By wondrous birth: Be thou in Adam's room
> The Head of all mankind, though Adam's Son.
> As in him perish all men, so in thee
> As from a second root shall be restor'd,
> As many as are restor'd, without thee none.
> His crime makes guilty all his Sons, thy merit
> Shall absolve them.

> So Man, as is most just,
> Shall satisfy for Man, be judg'd and die . . . .
> So Heav'nly love shall outdo Hellish hate
> Giving to death, and dying to redeem . . . .
> Nor shalt thou by descending to assume
> Man's nature, lessen or degrade thine own.
> (III, lines 281-304)

Billy, as the Christ image, is this divine-mortal son of God and man. He is compared to Hercules (p. 9), the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, Alcmene, and the comparison implies the dualism of his mortality and divinity. When asked who his father is, Billy replies "God knows, Sir" (p. 9), creating an ambiguity which identifies him as either the son of God or the son of man. The statement loses its ambiguity if interpreted to indicate that he is the divine son of God and the mortal son of mankind. Although clouded with secrecy, Billy's origin is analagous to the circumstance of Christ's virgin birth. Both incidents are unexplained mysteries. Billy's divine nature is implied in his physical appearance, which indicated "a lineage in direct contradiction to his lot" (p. 9). Since Billy is literally represented as a man, the "direct contradiction," or antithesis of his mortality, is the divinity which he contains. Although he is a common sailor, "noble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse" (p. 9). Billy is a common sailor in the same sense that Christ was a common carpenter, and both of them possess the "noble descent" which belies their mundane stations. In these aspects Billy is both Christ and man, but his divine nature becomes dominant as the novel progresses.

When Billy says "and good-bye to you too, old Rights of Man" (p. 7), he is renouncing his earthly identity, partially shedding the

human side of his dual being to assume the responsibility of completing the divine task to which he was appointed. Billy was not chosen or picked randomly for the chore; he was "elected" (p. 5), and this term reveals the special nature of his mission. Billy's surname, Budd, suggests that he is assuming a new identity or subordinating one aspect of his dual nature to allow the other to become dominant. He is budding, or maturing, thereby implying that he is about to accomplish whatever he has been "elected" to do. Billy adjusts to the transfer from the Rights of Man to the Indomitable without difficulty, and his "abrupt transition from his former and simpler sphere to the ampler and more knowing world" (p. 8) also indicates his assumption of the divine mission. The ship to which he transfers is a microcosmic world. When Billy first came aboard the Rights of Man, it "was a rat-pit of quarrels" (p. 6), but his essential goodness purified the ship.

> "But Billy came; and it was like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy. Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular, but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones. They took to him like hornets to a treacle." (p. 6)

Billy's goodness, like that of Christ, is an inherent quality which he radiates, transmitting it to those who surround him. He does not instruct or lecture; his natural goodness sets an example which influences those associated with him and attracts them to him.

The Christ image becomes even stronger when Billy resists the temptation which an agent of Claggart presents. The incident puzzles him, since it is his first direct encounter with evil.

Christ endured a similar experience, and it, too, was an initial contact with evil. Although Billy's stutter prohibits him from verbally replying effectively, Christ's rebuff of Satan's temptation in Paradise Regained would have been an appropriate answer for the young sailor's tempter:

> Extol not Riches then , the toil of Fools,
> The wise man's cumbrance if not snare, more apt
> To slacken Virtue and abate her edge,
> Than prompt her to do aught may merit praise.
> (II, lines 455-458)

Christ's answer to Satan in the Bible is firmer than that which Milton gives; He instructs Satan to "get thee hence" (Matthew 4: 10). Billy's reply to his tempter is equally concise: "D-D-Damme, I don't know what you are d-d-driving at, or what you mean, but you had better g-g-go where you belong" (p. 31). Billy, like Christ, rejects the tarnished offering of wealth. While Christ rebuffed Satan with unmistakably emphatic terms, Billy refused his tempter with stuttered words. Both figures, however, abruptly resist temptation in similar ways, staunchly meeting it with the internal determination which arises from their innate goodness.

Billy's stuttering, his only blemish, has been interpreted as the flaw which makes him human at the expense of his divine identity; however, the impediment is only the stamp of humanity which symbolizes the human aspect of his dual nature. Instead of branding him as a mere man, the stutter, considered in relation to his divinity, emphasizes his earthly identity.

The stutter serves, in this respect, as a symbol of Christ's humanity, just as Billy's innate goodness and innocence represent Christ's divinity.

Other incidents point out Billy's divine identity. He is a "peacemaker" (p. 7), and the statement describing Billy, "blessed are the peacemakers" (p. 7), is a literal transcription from Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 10). Melville remarks that Billy's "entire family was practically invested in himself" (p. 7), and this statement may be interpreted as a reference to the Holy Trinity. He is a foretopman, one who, in the microcosmic world of the ship, stands above others. The divine mystery surrounding his two-fold identity escapes human comprehension. "But something more, or rather, something else than mere shrewdness is perhaps needful for the due understanding of such a character as Billy Budd's" (p. 36). Man's limited comprehension cannot rationally explain the combination of the divine and the mortal in Billy, just as man cannot logically unravel the mystery of Christ's nature.

Billy's drubbing of Red Whiskers, an incident which has not received proper critical attention, seems to be more than a simple premonition of his attack on Claggart. The color "red" implies sin, and Red Whiskers, "the buffer of the gang" (p. 6), is a symbol of the original sin which has damned man since Adam's disobedience. By physically thrashing Red Whiskers, Billy symbolically purges humanity of the inherited guilt derived from Adam's

sin, and his physical victory represents the moral victory of Christ which makes salvation attainable for all mankind. "And will you believe it . . . the Red Whiskers now really loves Billy . . . . But they all love him" (p. 6). Since Billy, as Christ, has erased Adam's sin, humanity loves and adores him for his accomplishment.

Billy, therefore, is a Christ figure whose characteristics and actions stress the dualism of his identity. He is the Second Adam, the son of God and man, whose coming atones for Adam's sinful legacy to humanity. His ordained execution symbolizes the fulfillment of Christ's victory over Satan the the purgation of man's innate sin.

CHAPTER V

CLAGGART AS SATAN

Since Billy is the Christ image in the novel, an antithetical character must also be identified to fulfill the requirements of the allegory. Claggart, the master-at-arms on board the Indomitable, is such a figure. His evil nature distinctly contrasts with the goodness and innocence vested in Billy.

Claggart's evil nature makes him the diabolic figure in the allegory. With the exception of the Satan's physical abilities, he displays characteristics of the cunning arch-deceiver depicted in Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Like Milton's Satan, Claggart suffers from passion's enslavement of his rationality, and this imprisonment spawns the monomania which compels him to attempt to thwart Billy's divine mission. Claggart's passion, paradoxically, manifests itself in a coldly objective manner, making his situation similar to that of Milton's Satan. Melville points out Claggart's excess, stating that "toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of malignity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound" (p. 26). This impersonal rationality, which expresses the dominant internal passion, suggests Claggart's identity as Satan.

The evil within Claggart is not an acquired quality which may be explained as a temporary weakness. It is an inborn trait which spurs the monamania within him:

> Now something such an one was Claggart, 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."
> (pp. 26-27)

This natural depravity is "self-contained" (p. 26), and it makes Claggart a twisted character whose innate evil relentlessly drives him to the fatal confrontation with Billy. Claggart's natural depravity, however, is hidden, since the deceiving cloak of reason makes its possessor seem to be "always perfectly rational" (p. 26). Claggart does not exhibit the depravity through forceful displays of passion. It is always manifest through the craftily chosen use of cold objectivity. This perversion of reason, paradoxically, becomes a passion, or an emotional complusion to destroy or injure that which it longs to be but cannot.

Envy is the abstract quality which subordinates Claggart's rationality to complusive passion. When Claggart gazes at Billy, "pale ire, envy, and despair" (p. 27) overcome him. He envies Billy's innocence, goodness, and natural beauty. The last quality is particularly important, since this is "what it was that had first moved him against Billy" (p. 27). Like Milton's Satan when he first saw Adam, Claggart's conscience overcomes him when he looks at Billy:

> When Claggart's unobserved glance happened to light on belted Billy . . . that glance would follow the cheerful sea-Hyperion with a settled meditative and melancholy expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows. Yes, and sometimes

> the melancholy expression would have in it
> a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart
> could even have loved Billy but for fate and
> ban. (p. 35)

The sight of Billy fills Claggart with a wistful longing accompanied by sorrow. A "ban," however, prohibits him from loving the young sailor, and the limits which the "ban" imposes are reminiscent of Satan's plight in Paradise Lost. When Satan first caught sight of Adam in Paradise Lost, he expressed a similar empathy for the creatures which he saw. He could have loved them, but the ban imposed by God after his fall from heaven made such a feeling impossible (Paradise Lost, IV, lines 360-364).

Claggart does not allow the mellow feeling to flourish, possibly because he envies the young sailor and fears him, since he recognizes in Billy the innocence of the promised Christ who will vanquish him. Satan expresses a similar fear in Paradise Regained:

> For this ill news I bring, the Woman's seed
> Destin'd to this, is late of woman born:
> His birth to our just fear gave no small cause,
> But his growth now to youth's full flow'r, displaying
> All virtue, grace and wisdom . . . multiplies my fear.
> (I, lines 64-69)

Billy is the budd of "youth's full flow'r," the "Seed of Eve" (Paradise Regained, I, line 54) who will inflict the prophesized wound upon Claggart.

Driven by envy and fear, Claggart suppresses the brief mood of mellowness and resigns himself to his Fate.

> But this was an evanescence, and quickly repented
> of, as it were, by an immitigable look, pinching
> and shrivelling the visage into the momentary
> semblance of a wrinkled walnut. . . . But upon

> any abrupt unforeseen encounter a red light would (flash) forth from his eye like a spark from an anvil in a dusk smithy. (p. 35)

Claggart smothers the momentary empathy he feels for Billy quickly. When he encounters Billy unexpectedly, the "red light" flickers in his eyes, signifying the smoldering evil and the passion within him. Although he hated the divine qualities evident in Billy, Claggart could appreciate them. "Yet in an aesthetic way he saw the charm of it, the courageous free-and-easy temper of it, and fain would have shared it, but he despaired of it" (p. 28). Envy is the source of Claggart's despair, and it dictates the evil course which he follows. Milton's Satan also suffered from the uncontrollable passion of envy which forced him to challenge God, to successfully tempt man, and to attempt to corrupt Christ. Envy has overcome reason within Claggart, and he cannot escape from the monomaniacal obsession which it fires within him. The envy which haunts Claggart is the unforgivable passion.

> Something there is in it universally felt to be more shameful than even felonious crime. And not only does everybody disown it but the better sort are inclined to incredulity when it is in earnest imputed to an intelligent man. But since its lodgement is in the heart not the brain, no degree of intellect supplies a guarantee against it. (p. 28)

Claggart's envy is the supreme passion which motivates his cunning campaign against Billy. Although he occasionally feels a twinge of conscience when he sees Billy, envy subjugates it and hardens the Satanic figure to his task. This passion gnaws at Claggart constantly, pushing him to the final confrontation with Billy:

> As to Claggart, the monamania in the man--if that indeed it were--as involuntarily disclosed by starts in the manifestations detailed, yet in general covered over by his self-contained and rational demeanor; this, like a subterranean fire was eating its way deeper and deeper in him. Something decisive must come from it. (p. 36)

This "something decisive" does occur in the climactic scene between Billy and Claggart. Billy triumphs, and Claggart meets his foretold defeat.

Other elements in the novel indicate that Claggart is the Satanic figure. One of his primary duties as master-at-arms is that "of preserving order on the populous lower gun-decks" (p. 18). The phrase subtly suggests Claggart's Satanic identity as a sovereign who rules in Hell. The lower region is "populous" because, according to Calvinist theology, original sin has damned man and made most men unworthy of salvation. The pallor of Claggart's face is another clue to his identity, since it yields hints "of something defective or abnormal in the constitution of the blood" (p. 18). In Milton's works and the Bible, darkness is a common symbol for hell and the evil contained therein. The regions of hell are dark and dreary, except for the light of the fires of hell which do not illuminate the darkness. Seclusion from sunlight caused the pallor of Claggart's complexion, a seclusion which resembles that of Spenser's "Errour" in Canto I of Book One of <u>The Faerie Queen</u>:

> For light she hated as the deadly bale,
> Ay wont in desert darknesse to remaine,
> Where plaine none might her see, nor she see any plaine.

Like Errour, Claggart has an aversion to light which makes him uncomfortable when in it, suggesting that subtle evil is afraid of exposure by the light of innocence.

Claggart's high "social and moral" (p. 19) qualities contradict his lowly official station, indicating that, like Milton's Satan, he is a fallen angel whose monomania has brought about his degradation. He had been engaged in "some mysterious swindle" (p. 19) which resulted in his downfall and subsequent enlistment in the Navy. The "swindle" may refer to Satan's unsuccessful rebellion against God and his cunning temptation of Adam, both of which are stressed in Milton and the Bible. Claggart, again like Milton's Satan, possesses a "ferretting genius" (p. 20), which marks him as a figure of unusual, if perverted, abilities. The term "ferreting" indicates that he uses his genius, like Satan, to persistently worry those whom he envies. He is "a messenger of ill tidings" (p. 37) who carries evil throughout the microcosmic world of the Indomitable. Claggart performs his official duties well, using his "superior capacity" (p. 20) to carry out his labors. Something, however, brands him as an utterly unnatural figure. This distorting quality is the unchecked passion which has twisted him into an irrational creature whose innate evil dominates his whole being. He uses his "superior capacity," like the Miltonic and Biblical Satan, to perform his legitimate duties but also to further evil and to harry the good. After Billy kills him, the Satanic identification becomes complete. Billy and Vere attempt to pick up Claggart's lifeless body, but "it was like handling a dead snake" (p. 43). Satan

appears as a snake in Paradise Lost and the Bible, and the comparison of Claggart to a snake clearly labels the master-at-arms as Satan. The "thick black blood" which oozed from Claggart's ear and nose also stresses his role as an unnatural figure.

These characteristics and actions strongly suggest that Claggart is the Satanic figure in the novel whose natural depravity contrasts sharply with Billy's divine innocence and goodness. Uncontrollable envy subjugates Claggart's rationality, forcing him to make his fatal attempt to conquer Billy.

CHAPTER VI

VERE AS PILATE

Captain Vere, basically a Pilate figure, appears in contradictory roles of executioner and Billy's understanding Father, God. Like Pilate, he sentences an innocent man to death, although he does accept the responsibility of the execution order. It is true that, like God, he understands Billy's innocence, though demanding the sacrifice, but Pilate too understood the innocence of Christ while acting on the basis of expediency. Vere, unlike God, is not the supreme authority. He owes allegiance to a higher power--the law of the King--which requires firm obedience. Vere is a faithful upholder of the King's law, and his unwavering allegiance requires him to dictate the unjust terms of the sacrifice. He is the Pilate of Melville's allegory.

Vere's name provides a clue to his identity. Although Lawrance Thompson's interpretation of it as "the Heavenly (Starry) Creator (Fair-fax) God (Vere: Truth)"[1] is acceptable, an alternative interpretation of the name as "Heavenly Created Man' is more satisfactory. "Vere" may mean "Truth," but it suggests more naturally the Latin word vir, or man. This interpretation is more satisfying, since "Vere" and vir are pronounced alike. The name "Fairfax," which suggests the French verb faire, supports the alternative translation.

Vere is a representative of the forces upholding lawful order, but at the terrestial level. His allegiance is pledged to human

[1]See p. 14, Note 38.

authority rather than a divine one.

> He had seen much service, been in various engagements, always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline: thoroughly versed in the science of his profession, and intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so. (p. 15)

Vere is an experienced officer who looks after the needs of his men, yet he is a stern disciplinarian who demands strict adherence from his men to the law which he represents. A captain in the English navy, he retains the absolute authority over those aboard the Indomitable which Pilate, while governor of Palestine, held over the Jews. Vere, like Pilate, is a loyal servant of the government whose "settled convictions were as a dyke against those invading waters of novel opinion" (p. 17). The aura of unrest on the Indomitable resembles the mood of the Jews in Palestine at the time of Christ's crucifixion. Civil restlessness pervades, and the governing official must exercise rigid control through law to avoid revolution. Vere realizes that a pardon granted to Billy may cause the mutiny which he is attempting to avert.

Vere's actions during Billy's trial complete his identification as Pilate, though there are some differences. He issues the order for Billy's death just as Pilate condemns Christ. Like Pilate, Vere is aware of the innocence of the accused man, but, unlike Pilate, he accepts the responsibility for ordering the execution. Although Pilate disclaimed responsibility for Christ's death, he could not purge his guilt through such a simple act as washing his hands or declining the responsibility for the death order. He had

the power to decide whether Christ would live or die, and he alone issued the death mandate:

> Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him.
> Then came Jesus forth. . . . And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man!
> . . . Pilate saith unto them Take ye and crucify him: for I find no fault in him. . . .
> Then saith Pilate unto him . . . knowest thou not that I have the power to crucify thee, and have the power to release thee? (John 19: 4-10)

Vere has the same authority over Billy's fate. He recognizes the young sailor's innocence and sympathizes with him, but duty and the fear of mutiny force him to dictate the sacrifice. His duty is to the king's law, not to God, and he must uphold the order to which he is committed:

> "How can we adjudge to summary and death a fellow-creature innocent before God . . .? Does that state it aright? You sigh 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." (p. 50)

Vere contends that the execution must be ordered, since the situation requires the court to give a verdict compatible with human law. Billy's killing of Claggart is a violation of the king's law and he must be executed, although "at the Last Assizes it shall acquit" (p. 51). Billy is morally innocent but, judged by the law which Vere represents, his acquittal is impossible.

Vere is a fortress against insurrection who recognizes the danger of permitting a transgression of the king's law to pass unpunished. The execution must be carried out, since the refusal to

discipline the transgressor would be interpreted by the governed as a weakness. As Vere explains, "they would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them--afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture lest it should provoke new troubles" (p. 52). Discipline must be enforced, Vere believes, if an outbreak is to be avoided. Although the punishment is harsh, Vere recognizes the divine quality in Billy which will allow the young sailor to forgive his executors: "But did he know our hearts, I take him to be of that generous nature that he would feel even for us on whom in this military necessity so heavy a complusion is laid" (p. 52). The young sailor possesses a unique ability which permits him to pardon his persecutors. As the Christ figure, Billy is "of that generous nature: which trades forgiveness for persecution. Vere admits that Billy's killing of Claggart is "a mystery of iniquity, a matter for psychologic theologians to discuss" (p. 49). Circumstances, however, force him to make a judgment. He is a representative of the king, not a theologian, and his decision must be based on the human law to which he ascribes. Since he realizes that the "mystery" exceeds human comprehension, he must judge the event on the basis of the principle that he understands--the king's law.

Melville points out Vere's inability to judge Billy on the basis of the use of any criteria except the king's law. The captain is "a man who tho' he would always maintain his manhood in battle might not prove altogether reliable in a moral dilemma involving aught of

the tragic" (p. 47). Forced out of his familiar sphere of judgment, Vere is, like Pilate, a moral coward who shirks his moral duty in order to uphold his legal obligation. Like Pilate, he cannot risk the threat of insurrection, so he condemns an innocent man to death to alleviate the menace of mutiny. Since he is a military officer whose sole devotion, he believes, should be to the king's law, he will not make a decision which contradicts the authority to which he is devoted.

Melville does not pass an obvious judgment on Vere's decision to execute Billy. He gives the reader the option of interpreting its correctness. "Whether Captain Vere, as the surgeon professionally and privately surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, one must determine for himself by such light at this narrative may afford" (p. 45). Despite this statement, Melville treats Vere sympathetically, protraying him as a accomplished officer who has "a serious mind of superior order" (p. 17). Vere is a man of principle who carries out his duty faithfully and accepts the full responsibility for his harsh action. To uphold the law of the king he must give the order to execute the young sailor. Unlike Billy, but like Pilate, he is the subject of the amoral, man-made law, of which the king is a symbol, and his sworn allegiance to this law makes the execution necessary.

CHAPTER VII

THE REDEMPTION

The theme of atonement in Billy Budd culminates immediately after Claggart confronts Billy and falsely accuses the young sailor of conspiring to incite mutiny. Billy strikes him, unintentionally killing the accuser, and the fatal blow represents the triumph of Christ's divine mission over the evil force of Satan. The atonement is not completed, however, until Billy, the sacrificial lamb, is executed. His death symbolizes Christ's crucifixion, which expurgates original sin and affords man the opportunity for salvation.

When Billy hears the false charges lodged against him, the ruddy color of his face pales, looking as if "white leprosy" (p. 42) had overcome it. The color "white," a symbol of innocence and purity, reinforces his innocence of the charge brought against him. His speech impediment, however, prohibits him from refuting Claggart's accusation. Just before he strikes Claggart, Billy's facial expression is "a crucifixion to behold" (p. 43); the phrase emphatically suggests that this moment is the climactic one during which Billy, as the Christ figure, will accomplish his ordained task. "The next instant, quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck" (p. 43). The simile of light in the midst of darkness is noteworthy. Billy's use of his right arm to kill Claggart is also significant,

since Christ, according to Christian tradition, is depicted as He who "sitteth on the right hand" of God. Billy's killing Claggart thus becomes the divine triumph of Christ over Satan, and the victory reverses man's loss of salvation, a loss resulting from Adam's sin. Billy is the "fated boy" (p. 44) destined to rectify man's sins, the "angel of God" (p. 44) whose self-sacrifice will be the ultimate atonement.

Circumstances necessitate Claggart's false accusation of Billy, since the Satanic master-at-arms had recognized the handsome sailor as the promised "Seed of Eve" (Paradise Regained, II, line 54) who would inflict "the fatal wound" (Paradise Regained, II, line 53), an injury which, like the injury in Milton, would be inflicted upon his head. He labors to tempt Billy and destroy him, but his divine opponent strikes him and he falls, defeated as decisively as Satan in the Bible or in Paradise Regained.

> But Satan smitten with amazement fell . . . ;
> So after many a foil, the Tempter proud,
> Renewing fresh assaults, amidst his pride
> Fell whence he stood to see his Victor fall. . . .
> So struck with dread and anguish fell the fiend.
> (IV, lines 561-576)

Claggart's attempt to thwart Billy's ordained mission results in his own death, signifying the absolute, final defeat of Satan by a savior who has expelled innate evil from man and vanquished the originator of sin. Although Billy must die, his death paradoxically becomes the climax of evil's defeat.

Billy's trial is similar to Christ's hearing before Pilate. He does not speak in his own defense, except for the simple statement

"I have eaten the King's bread and I am true to the King" (p. 47). Clearly this king is not the sovereign of England, for Billy will be executed because he violated the earthly king's law. Billy is stating his obedience to God as the sole ruler of the universe. He has undertaken a divine mission, or "eaten the King's bread," and he will remain loyal to that Supreme Authority who appointed him to the task. Like Christ, he refuses to justify his actions to any mortal authority. One reads about Christ:

> And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing.
> Then said Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee?
> And he answered him to never a word.
> (Matthew 27: 12-14)

Billy does not protest the execution. Like Christ, he submissively accepts the unjust order, since it too is part of God's plan for man's salvation.

The death scene completes the identification of Billy as Christ. The young sailor's execution takes place during "the early-morning watch" (p. 53); similarly, Christ's crucifixion began at the sixth hour of the morning. The garments in which Billy was clothed at the time of the execution are powerful symbols of his innocence and purity. "In contrast with the funereal hue of these surroundings the prone sailor's exterior apparel, white <u>jumper</u> and white duck trousers . . . dimly glimmered in the obscure light of the bay like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at some upland cave's black mouth" (p. 56). The phrase "funereal hue" suggests the depressing atmosphere evident on the morning of the execution, yet

Billy's clothes contradict the feeling of depression. The whiteness represents his divinity and the divine nature of his completed mission. The garments "dimly glimmer," hinting at the divine light which will erase the stigma under which man had lived since Adam's disobedience. Melville's use of the month April in the passage is particularly appropriate, since Christ's crucifixion took place in that month. April is also the month of rebirth, the month of the budding maturity of spring. The "patch of snow" represents Billy, who is on the verge of entering, through the darkness of death, the "upland cave," or the realm of God, in the symbolic month of April.

Billy's final words resemble those of Christ when He states, immediately after His crucifixion, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23: 34). Billy absolves Vere, his persecutor, in the same manner.

> At the penultimate moment, his words, his only ones, words wholly unobstructed in the utterance were these--"God bless Captain Vere!" Syllables so unanticipated coming from one with the ignominious hemp about his neck--a conventional felon's benediction directed aft towards the quarters of honor; syllables too delivered in the clear melody of a singing-bird on the point of launching from the twig, had a phenomenal effect, not unenhanced by the rare personal beauty of the young sailor spiritualized now thro' late experiences so poignantly profound. (pp. 59-60)

Billy's assumption of his divine role is evident in the utterance of the words with which he forgives Vere--words which spoken without his usual stutter are doubly indicative of his achieving perfection. His final benediction, a sympathetic blessing of his executor, suggests that God has forgiven humanity for its transgressions.

The "singing-bird" also conveys a distinct impression of Billy's divinity. Like the bird, Billy is on the verge of symbolically "launching" himself from his present earthly station. His "personal beauty" is "spiritualized," indicating that the divine aspect of his dual being is dominant.

The terms Melville uses to describe the atmosphere immediately after the execution are markedly religious, indicating that divine justice has been satisfied and man has been saved: "At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East, was shot thro with a soft glory as 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" (p. 60). Harry Campbell views the execution as the final irony of Billy Budd, contending that Billy does not really ascend, since he is only hauled up to the end of the yard-arm.[1] Although Campbell's view may be justified somewhat, it is limited by its inability to rise above the literal level. The ascension is symbolic, just as Billy himself is a symbol for Christ. One must also remember that Christ did not ascend directly from the cross. He remained suspended on it until he was removed for burial. The symbolic ascension is the supreme triumph over evil and the rectification for man's sins. Billy is the "Lamb of God," the sacrificial victim whose death redeems humanity and delivers God's

[1]Harry M. Campbell, "The Hanging Scene in Melville's Billy Budd, Foretopman," Modern Language Notes, LXVI (May, 1951), 380.

grace to man again. The "Lamb of God" has cleansed man of inherited guilt; through his death man has been redeemed and reborn, as suggested by the phrase "full rose of dawn," a phrase which also significantly suggests a reflection (dawn) of the heavenly light (sun) upon the risen Christ figure.

Events after Billy's death extend the religious pattern of the allegory. The sailors who served with Billy retain their faith in him, believing in his innocence and indeed viewing him as a Christ figure.

> The spar from which the Foretopman was suspended, was for some few years kept trace of by the bluejackets. Their knowledge followed it from ship to dock-yard and again from dock-yard to ship, still pursuing it even when at last reduced to a mere dock-yard boom. To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross. (p. 62)

The spar serves, in the religious sense, the same symbolic purpose as the cross on which Christ was crucified. Perhaps the most significant occurence after the execution is the Indomitable's defeat of the Atheiste. The Indomitable, which literally means "incapable of being subdued," triumphs over the Atheiste, or "Godlessness," and the incident symbolizes the victory of the unconquerable will of God over disbelief. The meaning of the word "indomitable" appropriately suggests the presence of opposing forces seeking the downfall of Billy, man and Christ. Vere is mortally wounded during the engagement, and before dying he murmurs Billy's name, just as Pilate, according to an Apocryphal story, whispered Christ's name before he died.[2]

[2]Wright, "Biblical Allusion in Melville's Prose," p. 194.

The ballad "Billy in the Darbies," which ends the novel, is, at first glance, a troublesome passage which avoids immediate allegorical classification, yet it too fits into the religious interpretation of the novel. When Billy states "Ay, ay, all is up; and I must up too/Early in the morning, aloft from alow" (lines, 11-12), he indicates that he will ascend ("up") from earth ("alow") to heaven ("aloft"). The "bit o' biscuit" (line 14) and the "last parting cup" (line 15) are reminiscent of the sacraments of communion used at the Last Supper. The last line of the ballad, "I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist" (line 31), suggests that Billy, as Christ, has completed his divine mission. The task was tiring; he has finished it; now he welcomes the eternal peace he has earned.

The religious pattern of the allegory is fulfilled through Billy's execution, and it prevails through his symbolic ascension. His execution reflects the crucifixion of Christ, whose sacrifice grants man the opportunity for salvation and compensates for Adam's sin.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In Billy Budd Melville restates the terms of Christ's self-sacrifice, undertaken to redeem man for Adam's original sin and to make him worthy of salvation. Using Biblical parallels and Miltonic themes and methods, Melville constructs a specific religious allegory which reiterates the New Testament conflict of divine goodness and innate evil that culminates in Christ's sacrifice.

Since this thesis has focused almost exclusively on Billy Budd, it would be impossible to contend that this novel is Melville's personal testament of acceptance; nevertheless it is a testament of acceptance in which Billy, as the Christ image, accepts the consequences of his ordained task. He is the Son of God whose death rectifies Adam's original sin and allows man to merit salvation. He is the "fated boy" destined to defeat evil and cleanse man from Adam's initial transgression.

Before submitting to the execution, Billy must totally defeat Claggart, the Satanic figure, to achieve the fulfillment of his divine mission. Claggart, who represents innate depravity, is the symbolic originator of evil who must be defeated if man is to be redeemed. Envy has enslaved his rationality, and it forces him to attempt to frustrate Billy's divine task. In the confrontation

scene, however, he is defeated, and his defeat indicates that man has been redeemed.

Captain Vere is a representation of Pilate in the novel. Like Pilate, he condemns an innocent man, but he accepts the responsibility of his order. Vere, the "Heavenly Created Man," represents the allegiance to human law. Although he realizes that Billy is innocent, he must convict the young sailor. Billy's moral innocence may acquit him before God, but he has violated the king's law which Vere is pledged to uphold, and the captain must punish him for his transgression.

The confrontation scene, in which Billy kills Claggart, marks the climactic point of the religious allegory. The "angel of God" has conquered the originator of evil. Although Billy is guilty of breaking human law, he is the sacrificial lamb who is innocent before God and whose death will remove man's inherited stigma of original sin. Billy completes his divine mission through his execution and symbolic ascension. Through Billy's acceptance of his fate and obedience to God's will, man is cleansed of original sin and made worthy of salvation.

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RELIGIOUS ALLEGORY IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S BILLY BUDD

William Brittingham Wood, Jr.

ABSTRACT

Herman Melville's Billy Budd is an allegorical novel which reiterates the story of Christ's redemption of man from Adam's original sin. To construct the allegory, Melville blended his plot with Biblical connotations and overtones of other religion-related sources, primarily Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.

Melville employed that characters to reaffirm God's universal law. He created the major figures in the allegorical method of dual characterization: Claggart, who represents Satan, is also a symbol of evil; Billy, a Christ figure, is also a symbol of innocence; Vere is both a representation of Pilate and a personification of obedience to human law.

Billy is the Christ figure whose characteristics and actions stress his identity as the son of God and man. His ordained execution symbolizes the fulfillment of Christ's victory over Satan and the purgation of man's inherited sin.

Claggart is the allegory's Satanic figure. Like the Biblical and Miltonic Satan, he suffers from rationality's enslavement by passion. This defect forces him to attempt to thwart Billy's divine mission.

Vere is the Pilate figure who condemns an innocent man to death. He is a faithful upholder of the king's law, and his allegiance requires him to order Billy's execution.

The theme of atonement culminates immediately after Claggart accuses Billy of inciting mutiny. Billy's fatal blow represents Christ's triumph over Satan. The religious allegory prevails through the execution, the counterpart of Christ's crucifixion, and Billy's symbolic ascension.