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The Implications of the Holy Trinity & Its Antithesis in Billy Budd

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1970
THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOLY TRINITY AND ITS ANTITHESIS IN BILLY BUDD

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by
Nancy M. Davis Locke

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOLY TRINITY AND
ITS ANTITHESIS IN BILLY BUDD

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PREFACE

There have been a number of books and articles written about the theological underpinnings of the novel Billy Budd by Herman Melville and about the symbolic characters which he created. Several critics have brought some of this material together, but no one has really attempted to correlate the basic studies. This thesis will not only endeavor to do this, but it will add, as well, a personal interpretation of the theological content of the work.

The edition of the novel I have chosen as my working text is Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative), edited from the manuscript with introduction and notes by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts.\(^1\) There have been a number of squabbles over which volume of chapter compilations constitutes the fair copy. However, since the Hayford-Sealts's revision has appeared a number of prominent Melville scholars have chosen to accept it: Michael Milligate, H. Bruce Franklin, John W. Rathbun, Olive L. Fite, and—with minor reservations—Paul Brodtkorb. Rathbun, in particular, speaks of this version with high regard:

> With the publication by Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts of a new reading text of Billy Budd, accompanied by a complete transcription of the genetic text, an excellent introduction, and awesomely complete notes, we are now possessed of the most reliable text that can reasonably be expected. . . . The primary materials included offer the first real opportunity to

\(^1\)Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962.
come to grips with the central significance of Melville's compact masterpiece. Here the genetic text compiled by Hayford and Sealts is invaluable, for it gives solid clues to Melville's increasingly sharpened purposes in writing the novel. In addition by providing us with the chronologies of the various drafts, the editors make it possible to be conscious of inherent difficulties in the text, which, if they cannot be resolved, can at least serve as a restraint on ingenious attempts to impose an absolute order on materials that finally must remain recalcitrant.2

In addition, Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., argues that if a definitive copy could exist, Hayford and Sealts's would certainly be it.3

It is certainly understandable why a definitive copy of Billy Budd would be difficult to attain. For one thing, the manuscript was assembled at a cluttered desk by Mrs. Melville after her husband's death. She marked papers for what she believed them to be—not really what they always were—and she marked out and substituted here and there what she either thought Melville had wanted to say or at least what she thought he should have said. So it can be seen why the Hayford-Sealts's edition is invaluable.

I would like to express my special gratitude to Ann Wilson Hawkins, Dr. William E. McMahon, and the Rev. David J. Senefeld for the assistance they have afforded me. Special thanks must also go to Wilma B. Rabold for her help and interest.


3Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., "The Definitive Billy Budd: 'But Aren't It All a Sham?'" PMLA, LXXXII (December, 1967), 602-612.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ........................................ 1

Chapter
  I. CAPTAIN VERE ..................................... 5
  II. BILLY BUDD ....................................... 15
  III. DANSKER ......................................... 25
  IV. CLAGGART ......................................... 35
CONCLUSION ........................................... 44
BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................... 53
INTRODUCTION

The sense of conviction, of assurance, which most readers find in Billy Budd is emphasized in the interesting poem "Herman Melville," by W. H. Auden. It is worth quoting in entirety as part of the search for Melville's positive meaning:

Towards the end he sailed into an extraordinary mildness,  
And anchored in his home and reached his wife  
And rode within the harbour of her hand,  
And went across each morning to another island.

Goodness existed: that was the new knowledge  
His terror had to blow itself quite out  
To let him see it; but it was the gale had blown him  
Past the Cape Horn of sensible success  
Which cries: "This rock is Eden. Shipwreck here."

But deafened him with thunder and confused with lightning:  
--The maniac hero hunting like a jewel  
The rare ambiguous monster that had maimed his sex,  
Hatred for hatred ending in a scream,  
The unexplained survivor breaking off the nightmare--  
All that was intricate and false; the truth was simple.

Evil is unspectacular and always human,  
And shares our bed and eats at our own table,  
And we are introduced to Goodness every day,  
Even in drawing-rooms among a crowd of faults:  
He has a name like Billy and is almost perfect  
But wears a stammer like a decoration:  
And every time they meet the same thing has to happen;  
It is the Evil that is helpless like a lover  
And both are destroyed before our eyes.

For now he was awake and knew  
No one is ever spared except in dreams;  
But there was something else the nightmare had distorted--  
The howling storm had been his father's presence  
And all the stars above him sang as in his childhood  
"All, all is vanity," but it was not the same;  
For now the words descended like the calm of mountains--
--Nathaniel had been shy because his love was selfish--
But now he cried in exultation and surrender
"The Godhead is broken like bread. We are the pieces."

And sat down at his desk and wrote a story.

Like Auden, most critics have not seriously questioned
Melville's use of religion and philosophy in his works. The prob-
lems usually lie in deciding whose philosophy or which religion.
Probably Melville settled, in the end, on his own philosophy: an
accretion of all he had seen, heard, read, and thought. Otherwise
Melville would never have written _Billy Budd_, since the evidence
is strong in this novel that Melville knew where he stood philo-
sophically. As Nathalia Wright states in _Melville's Use of the
Bible_: "The predominately realistic tales are, significantly,
toward the end of the list. It was in his most profound thought
and his most distinguished style that he relied most heavily on
Scripture."1

That is not to say the scripture was all. Bayle, Schopenh-
hauer, and Kierkegaard--not to mention foreshadowings of others--
are all there, carefully intermeshed.

An initial problem is whether or not Melville is the nar-
rator. Edward Rosenberry chooses to answer the question indig-
nantly:

The whole "testament" controversy is shot through
with the flaw or the threat of it--the danger, that
is, of allowing no artistic distance at all in the nar-
rative or of imposing on the fiction one's own norms in
place of those provided, implicitly or explicitly, by
the author.

1 Nathalia Wright, _Melville's Use of the Bible_ (Durham:
This assumption that a fictional character can be taken as a reliable spokesman for his author is boggy ground to build on. Yet somewhere within every successful fiction there must be adequate clues to that much-disputed but still indispensable value, the author's intention.  

This is Rosenberry's final opinion on the matter:

"A firm will is needed to remember, with Tindall, that Billy Budd is "not a conclusion like a sermon . . . [but] a vision of confronting what confronts us, of man thinking things out with all the attendant confusion and uncertainties." This is a Sophoclean Melville in Billy Budd, speaking with a detachment and a respect for fact that criticism must emulate if it is to get at his meaning."  

Thus the narrator's presence is in Billy Budd, but is well distanced, and Melville's meanings must be pieced out by inference.

As is so often the case, different critics see the work in different lights. One such view, much more negative than mine, is Raymond Weaver's:

In the character of Billy Budd, Melville attempts to portray the native purity and nobility of the uncorrupted man. Melville spends elaborate pains in analysing "the mystery of iniquity," and in celebrating by contrast the god-like beauty of body and spirit of his hero. Billy Budd, by his heroic guilelessness, is, like an angel of vengeance, precipitated into manslaughter; and for his very righteousness he is hanged. Billy Budd, finished within a few months before the end of Melville's life, would seem to teach that though the wages of sin is death, that sinners would seem to toil for a common hire. In Billy Budd the orphic sententiousness is gone, it is true. But gone also is the brisk lucidity, the sparkle, the verve. Only the disillusion abided with him to the last."  

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4Raymond M. Weaver, Herman Melville: Mystic and Mariner (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921), p. 381.
It would seem difficult to leave this meditative novel with a feeling of futility, but Weaver certainly has experienced something very close to this.

However, this study is based on the assumption that there is an *axis mundi* for *Billy Budd*, and that it is a Trinitarian pattern greatly marked by order and balance.

Specifically, this study will deal with the four characters who comprise the members of a hypothetical Triune Good and Triune Evil. It will try to show that these two trinities bring balance to *Billy Budd*. The four characters, Captain Vere, Billy Budd, Dansker, and Claggart, will each be dealt with in separate chapters in which personal views as well as relevant criticism will be presented. The Triune Good is assumed to be composed of Captain Vere, Billy Budd, and Dansker, while the Triune Evil is found in one man—John Claggart. In the conclusion, a synthesis of the philosophical-theological underpinnings of *Billy Budd* will be attempted in order to illustrate the way in which Melville achieved some of his most important order and balance.
CHAPTER I

CAPTAIN VERE

Since the Father is the generating force of the Trinity, proof of His presence in Billy Budd should come first. The pre-eminence of God immediately suggests that a character representing Him would have the same kind of authority in his own sphere. Such a man is Edward Fairfax Vere, captain of the Bellipotent. Melville hints at the unusual ancestry of Captain Vere by using the following lines from Andrew Marvell:

This 'tis to have been from the first
In a domestic heaven nursed,
Under the discipline severe
Of Fairfax and the starry Vere.¹

He states that this poem concerns an ancestor of Vere, not Captain Vere himself. But the short digression, recounting the occasion of his receiving the nickname "Starry," leads to the belief that Melville intended special meaning for this poem. Although applied to this common ancestor in a natural sense, it can also be applied to Captain Vere in a supernatural sense, suggesting his origin in the stars as a sign of close relation to God.² Vere's cousin, Denton, echoes the Psalms (in praise of


²For corroborating view see Michael Milligate, "Melville and Marvell: A Note on Billy Budd," English Studies, XLIX
God's name): "Give ye joy, Ed; give ye joy, my starry Vere!"

Captain Vere's action in the novel, the removal of Billy Budd from the Rights of Man to the Bellipotent, is the use of this absolute authority. Also, there may well be a symbolic implication of divine power as transcendent to the realm of man. This removal of Billy is analogous to the beginning of the public life of Christ. Up until the time He was thirty, Christ's life was that of an ordinary man. At this point, He left behind his rights as a man and assumed the responsibilities of the Divine

(February, 1968), 47-50; and Richard Chase, Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 261. It is interesting to note Chase's explanations of Vere's name: "The captain's name--Edward Fairfax Vere--perhaps indicates what he is. He is Man (vir), but civilized Man." If considering Melville's intention of employing homophones--even English-Latin--this would be relevant; however, if Melville intended to have Vere's name coincide with the Latin, he would more likely have chosen a shortened version of veritas (truth)--Vere. Another fascinating discussion of Vere's name is contained in Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville (London: John Lehmann, 1951), p. 253. Mason not only sees Vere's nickname, "Starry," as an indication of patrician background but also digresses into resemblances between Edward Fairfax Vere and Edward Fairfax Rochester--both of whom symbolize power (see n. 8, p. 253). It might be worth mentioning that there is some of Melville's familial background that parallels the origins of Captain Vere, discussed in Newton Arvin, "A Note on the Background of Billy Budd," American Literature, XX (November, 1940), 329-346. These associations of Vere with concepts such as truth and power suggest that Vere certainly could be a symbol of God.

3 Billy Budd, p. 61. For a discussion of some of Melville's Hebraisms, see Wright, p. 166. Any touches by which Melville invokes the Old Testament could possibly serve to relate Vere to God ideas.

4 Cf. William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1944), p. 236. Sedgwick notes Vere's quiet but firm authority at the point of his instructions to his subordinates concerning the judgment of Billy Budd. See also William Eraswell, "Melville's Billy Budd as 'An Inside Narrative," American Literature, XXIX (May, 1957), 159. Eraswell says: "Melville himself makes no explicit judgment on Vere's part in having Billy hanged." This is also the case with the men aboard the ship, who never doubt Vere's authority, as man does not doubt God's authority.
part of His dual nature. This was done to accomplish the Will of the Father—in the same way Billy Budd is taken aboard the Bellipotent to accomplish the will of Captain Vere.

Melville further implies a father-son relationship on the natural level:

He [Captain Vere] was old enough to have been Billy's father. The austere devotee of military duty, letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity, may in the end have caught Billy to his heart, even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest.  

The hint in the above quotation of a Vere-Billy relationship similar to that of Abraham and Isaac has been developed by various critics.  

Mason explains that "Melville carries the analogy no further than a reference to the Abraham-Isaac relationship but the profounder reference, to the God the Father of the Christian Trinity, will stand even closer examination." Mason also recognizes an implicit father-son relationship on the natural level, as does Chase, who states that the father-son relationship is not contradicted by the author.  

Captain Vere, at his death, murmurs the words, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd." In explanation, Melville continues:

5 Billy Budd, p. 115.


7 Mason, p. 254.

8 Richard Chase, "Dissent on Billy Budd," Partisan Review, XV (November, 1948), 1215.
That these were not the accents of remorse would seem clear from what the attendant said to the Bellipotent's senior officer of marine, who as the most reluctant to condemn of the members of the drumhead court, too well knew, though here he kept the knowledge to himself, who Billy Budd was.9

So there seems to be a relationship between Captain Vere and Billy Budd other than that of captain and sailor.

Moreover, Captain Vere possesses idiosyncrasies which mark him as Divine. He wears no surface indication of his captaincy. For Vere to wear an insignia of rank would be as pointless as for God to don a sign advertising His Supremacy. It is needless for Vere to establish his relationship with the crew just as it is unnecessary that God overtly establish His relationship with Man. Instinctively, Man knows his place, as do the officers in the novel when "in silent deference they retired to the leeward" at the Captain's appearance.10

Unlike the other captains in the fleet, Vere, like God, remains remote; this remoteness is explainable partly by his allegorical position. God stays in His Heaven and Vere maintains his aloofness on the weather side of the ship. Relative to the nature of God, Vere's spirit also "moves upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). Melville shows that Vere often stands alone and contemplatively gazes out upon the sea.

God, too, stands alone, for Man can only know His Intellect and Will. Having been created in the Image and Likeness of these aspects, man apprehends God chiefly through them; therefore, it would be in the area of Intellect and Will that Melville would

9Billy Budd, p. 129.
10Ibid., p. 69.
be expected to make Vere most Godlike.

Obviously Vere's knowledge is of the consuming intellectual type in that he is constantly seeking Truth:

He had a marked leaning toward everything intellectual. He loved books, never going to sea without a newly replenished library, compact but of the best. . . . With nothing of that literary taste which less heeds the thing conveyed than the vehicle, his bias was toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines. . . . In this line of reading he found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts—confirmation which he had vainly sought in social converse, so that as touching most fundamental topics, there had got to be established in him some positive convictions which he forefelt would abide in him essentially unmodified so long as his intelligent part remained unimpaired. . . . His settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no few minds in those days, minds by nature not inferior to his own. While other members of that aristocracy to which by birth he belonged were incensed at the innovators mainly because their theories were inimical to the privileged classes, not alone Captain Vere disinterestedly opposed them because they seemed to him insusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind.11

Melville thus affirms that Vere's intellect is not only of a higher form but is morally superior as well. The Will of God, on the other hand, seeks complete Good, and Vere—in all his action—aims for the ultimate good. The main purpose in executing Billy Budd is to restore balance to the maritime universe. For this reason Vere is represented as a disciplinarian—not for the sake of discipline itself but because law maintains balance and order.

Another area indicative of Vere's symbolic identity is the captain's meetings with Billy Budd. Regarding these, there

11 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
is a carefully contrived correspondence between the Biblical text relating the period before Christ's crucifixion and Melville's report of that immediately preceding Billy Budd's hanging. To understand fully the significance of these events and Billy's ultimate death, it is necessary to consider the archetypal death of Christ. In traditional Christian logic, Man sinned against God in the Garden of Eden, and since this sin was committed against an infinite personage, it required infinite retribution--of which Man, as a finite being, is incapable. Of necessity, then, the person making retribution must be both human and infinite. To fulfill this necessity God the Father sent His Son, who became Man. Such an arrangement was necessary in order that Redemption might take place, so the Christian logic goes.

In essence, then, Christ had to accomplish two things by His death: He had to make infinite retribution to God for Man's sin, and He had to restore Man to his former state. These two positive actions would return balance to the Spiritual Universe by cancelling out the negative state of Man's sin and punishment. The situation in Billy Budd closely resembles Christ's propitiation of God. There had been mutinies before committed by other sailors, and since Billy is a sailor, he shares to that extent in their guilt. In equal proportions Man shares the guilt of Adam. Then Billy, for whatever reason, strikes and kills a superior officer--which is against naval law. To restore order and balance to the maritime universe, Billy Budd has to be sacrificed, and the two positive effects of his death are to cancel out the "murder" and discourage further mutinies--reinstating proper balance.
Captain Vere plays a parallel role in the novel to that of the Father in the Redemption. He delegates Billy as sacrificial lamb and predetermines his fate. Although in both cases the judgments of others are blamed for the resulting death, the adjudication is actually decreed beforehand in the presence of the condemned.

After the sentence is passed on Billy a secret interview takes place that is reminiscent of Christ's talk with His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Melville says this of the occasion:

Beyond the communication of the sentence what took place at this interview was never known. But in view of the character of the twain briefly closeted in that stateroom, each radically sharing in the rarer qualities of our nature—so rare indeed as to be all but incredible to average minds however much cultivated—some conjectures may be ventured.

It would have been in consonance with the spirit of Captain Vere should he on this occasion have concealed nothing from the condemned one—should he indeed have frankly disclosed to him the part he himself had played in bringing about the decision, at the same time revealing his actuating motives. On Billy's side it is not improbable that such a confession would have been received in much the same spirit that prompted it. Not without a sort of joy, indeed, he might have appreciated the brave opinion of him implied in his captain's making such a confidant of him. Nor, as to the sentence itself, could he have been insensible that it was imparted to him as to one not afraid to die.12

It is important to note that the deeper relation as Melville sees it would be "incredible" to most men, and that Vere and Billy display the "rarer" qualities of human nature—those close to the divine.

At their final encounter Billy faces Captain Vere and

12Ibid., pp. 114-115.
pronounces his last words, "God bless Captain Vere." As is commonly accepted, these words are related by most critics to the words of Christ: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." But they convey more meaning if compared to Christ's last utterance: "Father, into thy hands, I commend my spirit." Just as Christ made the final complete sacrifice—His life to serve God's Will—Billy Budd does the same, and states his complete affirmation of the Captain's will before the entire crew: "God bless Captain Vere."

A multitude of subordinate critical material exists which is worthy of consideration. Although no single item is sufficient within itself to prove the symbolic Divinity of Vere, the combined weight produces substantial support to the conjecture. F. O. Matthiessen asserts: "... Vere is the wise Father. ..." Lawrence Thompson states that Vere is "Omnipotent and God-like" and possesses "foreknowledge" and the "Responsibility of God." Even C. B. Ives, in his article concerning Billy Budd and naval law, subscribes to the premise that "a captain of a man-of-war

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13 Ibid., p. 123.
16 Billy Budd, p. 123.
was godlike." The fact that Vere would have "natural goodness" and "natural justice" is strong proof of his Divinity, a point confirmed by Mason.

More emphatic treatment of the Divine Father-Son relationship is evidenced in Braswell's study. He states:

Vere is portrayed as suffering more than Billy. The relationship between the two, suggestive as it is of the relationship between . . . God the Father and the Son, apparently enables Billy to understand that Vere's role is necessitated by his adherence to forms to which Vere ultimately gives his own life.

Mason, capsulizing Melville's "unique and unforgettable allegory," says Billy Budd is "equipped with the supreme symbolism of God the Father decreeing the sacrifice of his incarnate Son in the redemption of innocence from the powers of the Arch-Enemy."

Numerous critics have raised the possibility that Vere possesses qualities of Pontius Pilate. Roland Duerksen believes Vere might be Pilate-like. Miss Wright says: "Like Pilate, he condemns to death a man whom he knows to be innocent, though unlike Pilate he accepts the full responsibility of his act."

Similarly, Grant Watson states:

In Captain Vere we find a figure which may interestingly be compared to Pontius Pilate. Like Pilate, he condemns the just man to a shameful death, knowing him to be

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20 Mason, p. 257.

21 Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought, p. 143.

22 Mason, p. 254.


24 Wright, p. 131.
innocent, but, unlike Pilate, he does not wash his hands, but manfully assumes the full responsibility, and in such a way as to take the half, if not more than the half, of the bitterness of the execution upon himself.25

As can be readily seen, the Pilate theme—when related to Vere—cannot be supported except very obliquely, so the Pilate connection must be seen as marginal.

Although no single point is conclusive, the combined weight of these insights preclude any doubt about the duality of Captain Vere's role. He must be to some extent a symbol for God the Father.

CHAPTER II

BILLY BUDD

Billy Budd has been discussed in Melville criticism as an embodiment of a multitude of personalities or virtues. The two most recurrent assumptions, however, are Billy as "Adam before the fall" and Billy as Christ. Actually, there is no great problem involved in accepting both interpretations. Christ was conceived sinless and would, therefore, be just as innocent and faultless as Adam before the fall--both being perfect Man. In considering those who see Budd as "Adam and only Adam," a brief discussion of "Edenic" criticism is necessary.

Harry Levin in The Power of Blackness is representative of the critics who plead the Adamic case.1 Much of the basis of their argument consists of the passage: "Who in the nude might have posed for a statue of Young Adam before the fall."2 Also, R. W. B. Lewis states that Melville intended Billy Budd to be the manifestation of Adam; however, later in this work Lewis admits the possibility that the Christ figure might also be involved. His bias is understandable, of course, since his work is devoted to the subject of the Adamic characteristics in American

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1 Levin, p. 196.
2 Billy Budd, p. 94.
literature, and especially to novelists' last works. In passing, Miss Wright mentions the possibility of Billy Budd's possessing the quality of an Adam figure. Adam, Christ, or (as John Rathbun has suggested) Isaac--one or all three--may serve as the referent to the symbolic Billy Budd. Rathbun says, "Billy's character remains enigmatic. The symbolic roles he plays as Adam, as Isaac, as Christ, become at last meaningless and futile." However, one need not accept Rathbun's negative point of view.

In the final analysis, Billy Budd should indeed possess some of Adam's characteristics. After all, if he is truly a Christ figure, his mission was atonement for the sin of Adam, and he would approximately possess prelapsarian qualities if he is to attain redemption for fallen Man. As for Isaac, he and his father are prophetic of the Christ to come; thus the Christ relation appears to be the largest of Melville's intentions.

There is often nothing more salient about a literary character than his name. If an author intends symbolism or allegory, he frequently couches within the names of the main characters the characteristics they possess or represent. If the traits of the Deity are to be supposed, then the character might well have a god-like name. Melville's ascription of the name "Billy Budd" to the main character in the novel probably should, therefore, have some deep connotation. In The Wake of the Gods, H. B. Franklin asserts one aspect of the significance of Melville's choice:

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4 Wright, p. 75.

5 Rathbun, pp. 25, 33.
"The mythology and rites of the British Druids in large part define both the action and the symbolism of Billy Budd." According to Franklin, the most important Celtic god has been cited as "Hu," the "Celtic Apollo," who was also known as "Beli" and "Budd," as well as the "god of victory." This Celtic god was seen as sundry luminous heavenly bodies. Franklin not only points out that Billy Budd is identified with the Greek god Apollo, the solar divinity, but he also states that "The first Handsome Sailor to appear in Billy Budd is worshipped like the grand sculptured bull of the Assyrian priests. The old British god Hu, Budd, or Bel—possibly the Celtic equivalent of Baal or Bel—was often represented by a sacred bull."  

7 Ibid., p. 195.
8 Ibid., p. 196. The author has inadvertently made Billy Budd "the first Handsome Sailor" mentioned in the novel. This error is quite possible without close scrutiny of the text. The first sailor is merely a type that Melville uses to compare with a later type: Billy Budd. This idea parallels a significant action in history. The first Handsome Sailor is of a royal nature, indicated by Aldebaran (a star of first magnitude, a red star—denoting royalty and sacrifice, and having the prominent place amidst lesser stars of the eye of the constellation Taurus the Bull) and the worship of the Assyrian bull. The first example that comes to the narrator's mind is a Black Handsome sailor he had seen fifty years previously. The second Handsome sailor he refers to is Billy Budd who, he says, possesses the same qualities but with important differences. The Black sailor is analogous to a pagan deity while Billy Budd represents a higher figure. Later in the novel, the chaplain attempts to comfort Billy Budd; Billy quietly rejects him much in the same manner that Christ silently rejects the high priests and pharisees at his trial; thus, Christ rejects the old faith in favor of the new. See also Harry Modean Campbell, "The Hanging Scene in Melville's Billy Budd: A Reply to M. Giovannini," Modern Language Notes, LXX (November, 1955), 499.
Regarding Billy Budd's origin, Melville offers a suggestive episode:

Asked by the officer, a small, brisk little gentleman as it chanced, among other questions, his place of birth, he replied, "Please, sir, I don't know."
"Don't know where you were born? Who was your father?"
"God knows, sir."

Furthermore, Melville spends a number of pages describing Billy's physical beauty, perfection, and untainted intellect. There is nothing known of his life except a few scraps of data about his joining the service on the Rights of Man and his short stay there. His life is just as vague as Christ's—there is only one mention of Christ's life between his first years and the age of thirty—which is, of course, his visit to the temple at the age of twelve.

Yet, as the Prince of Peace came quietly into his new life at the age of thirty, so was Billy's coming, when impressed into naval service. Also, there is no doubt among the crew members of his innocence. In interpretations of Billy Budd, he has been depicted as "the apotheosis of puer aeternus." Certainly Billy, as was Christ, is the epitome of true innocence. Everyone, including the ship's captain, gives no consideration to the report of Billy's part in an impending mutiny which was instigated by the master-at-arms. Later, however, when formally
accused, Billy was confronted in person by Claggart, his accuser, at the request of Captain Vere, and was unable to defend himself. Struck dumb, Billy felled his accuser. Accordingly, says John Noone: "From the moment Billy strikes Claggart, Billy's fate is sealed."12 In the text, Melville says he is a "fated boy" and further that Claggart is "Struck dead by an angel of God! [Billy] Yet the angel must hang!"13 The words "fated boy" carry with them a destiny from birth, and Melville was surely too astute in his word choice to have put such words unmeaningfully into the captain's mouth. Melville continues Vere's dialogue:

"Go now," said Captain Vere with something of his wonted manner. "Go now. I presently shall call a drumhead court. Tell the lieutenants what has happened, and tell Mr. Mordant" (meaning the captain of marines), "and charge them to keep the matter to themselves."14

It is as if Vere knew all along this trying time would come, and so, he must follow the proceedings to the end that had been preordained— even though his tone is touched with Weltschmerz. Obviously, Billy is to be sacrificed. As Tyrus Hillway observes: "Melville was at pains, albeit with powerful artistic restraint, to remind us, in Billy's execution, of that greater sacrifice once endured by the Son of God Himself."15 Hillway states that

14 Ibid., p. 101.
Billy's death is allegorical or at least symbolic. It was, without a doubt, Melville's intention to recreate the sacrifice of the Son of God in an archetypal manner in that the universal pattern for propitiation and expiation has been a sacrifice of the people's highest representative. A good illustration of this sacrifice appears in Franklin's *The Wake of the Gods*:

Davies prints and twice translated a poem which describes a killing of the sacred bull, a killing which Davies says could be either an accident or a mystic ritual: "It was my earnest wish that thou mightest live, O thou of victorious energy! Alas, thou Bull, wrongfully oppressed, thy death I deplore. Thou has been a friend of tranquility!

In view of the sea, in the front of the assembled men, and near the pit of conflict, the raven has pierced thee in wrath!" The similarities between the slaying of this sacred bull and the slaying of Billy Budd hardly need statement. Not a soul on the Bellipotent but earnestly wishes that Budd might live, Budd of victorious energy. Budd is indeed wrongfully oppressed, and his death is deplored by all. He has been the greatest friend of tranquility. In view of the sea, in the front of the assembled men, and near the site of fatal conflict, Budd is ritually sacrificed, sacrificed because he has been pierced by the inscrutable wrath beneath Claggart's "silken jet curls."

Between the judgment and the execution of the sentence, Billy's passion occurs--the agony in Gethsemane noted in Chapter I. Melville even includes in the poem "Billy in the Darbies" some details of the condemned man's last meal--the Last Supper of Christ. Melville's poem is rather dreadful in aesthetic terms, as is apparent in these lines:

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On an empty stomach now never it would do.
They'll give me a nibble—bit o' biscuit ere I go.
Sure, a messmate will reach me the last parting cup.18

Baird mentions in Ishmael the possibility of Billy being the
Eucharist, which would parallel the Last Supper and the dedication of Christ's Body and Blood.19

The sacrificial act in Billy Budd, Franklin observes, is remarkably similar to Druid legends:

Many have noticed that Christian terms and images accumulate more and more thickly around Billy Budd as he passes from sailor idol and blessed peacemaker to ritual sacrifice to sailor God. Even the change, "for special reasons," of the yardarm from which Budd is to hang accentuates his image as a Christ: instead of being hanged from the customary foreyard [they use] . . . the mainyard, the yard which forms a cross with the central and highest mast. But this crucifix is not merely Christian: "The cross was also used by the Druids as a sacred symbol. The Druids seek studiously for an oak tree, large and handsome, growing up with two principal arms, in the form of a cross, beside the main stem, upright. If the two horizontal arms are not sufficiently adapted to the figure, they fasten a cross-beam to it." Long after Budd's Christ-like . . . ascension into the fleecy sky the sailors regard the spar from which he was hanged as the true Cross.20

Freimarck observes that they chose to have Billy hanged from the mainmast, which was an unusual procedure. The ratio of the mainmast to the cross-arm is proportionately longer than the other two, giving it a more cruciform appearance. The mast arrangement is also related to the three-cross arrangement of Golgatha—as it is in the "three trees on the low sky" in Eliot's "Journey

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18 Billy Budd, p. 132.
19 Baird, p. 221.
In addition it is pertinent to note that Billy Budd's physical reaction at the moment of death was not that of the ordinary hanged man. Melville explains:

"You admit, then, that the absence of spasmodic movement was phenomenal."
"It was phenomenal, Mr. Purser, in the sense that it was an appearance the cause of which is not immediately to be assigned."

In other words, the victim's reaction is extraordinary, if not supernatural.

Perhaps the most conclusive evidence is the part of the narrative immediately following his death, that is, the Ascension. This preternatural event also has a parallel in Druid history, as related by Franklin in The Wake of the Gods when he quotes the following: "They call their God Budd, the God of Victory, the king who rises in light and ascends in the sky," and again: "... the king who rises in light and ascends the sky." Camp-bell in his article on Billy Budd states:

In the short-story version entitled "Baby Budd, Sailor" Melville says that Billy "ascending, took the full shekinah of the dawn"; this becomes the "full rose of the dawn" in the final novel version

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22 Richard Chase, in "Dissent on Billy Budd," p. 1217, stresses this point.
23 Billy Budd, p. 125.
24 Godfrey Higgin, Anacalypsis (2 vols.; London, 1836), II, 77, as quoted in Franklin, p. 188.
25 Davies, p. 116, as cited in Franklin, p. 188.
and removed the strongly religious word shekinah.

Melville was undoubtedly toning down the religious symbolism.26

Numerous critics refer to the similarity between this Ascension and Shekinah.27 In an article criticizing Campbell's first article on Billy Budd's hanging, G. Giovannini says that Campbell does not give full magnitude to the symbolism of "glory" and its direct equivalent in "Shekinah," which, of course, means the visible manifestation of a Deity. He further rebukes him for having been respectfully Biblical through the entire article and then implying that in religious matters Melville is being ironic.28

Replying to Giovannini's accusations, Campbell states that Giovannini has misconstrued his intention.29 Unfortunately, Campbell has warped Giovannini's phrases and has, to some extent, replied


27 Miss Wright, pp. 160-161, explains Shekinah in the following manner: "The conception of the Shekinah was, in fact, later Jewish thought than the Old Testament canon. It does not occur in Scripture at all but in the Aramaic Targums, whose expositors, reluctant to describe God in terms suggestive of anthropomorphism, made substitutes for his name in those passages which in any fashion localized him. Among the substitutes were the Word, the Spirit, the Shekinah, the latter signifying the earthly dwelling of the Deity. It must have been a conception attractive to Melville, with his tendency to dehumanize the nature of truth, to push it beyond the bounds of speech or attainment. He referred to it again, and again, associated it with an image of fire: the phosphorescent ocean in Clarel, to which the sky at Jesus's birth is compared, is called a Shekinah. The use of the word on each occasion defines rather significantly the vision which he is describing: it is not the ultimate reality itself which is revealed but only a manifestation of it."

28 Giovannini, pp. 494-495.

29 Campbell, Reply, p. 500.
to a non-existent reproach. In any case, Campbell's assumption of theological irony is a conjecture that jars with the rest of the novel. Concerning the redeeming qualities of Billy Budd, John Rathbun states: "Billy becomes the Adam who does not fall, the Isaac who is not saved, the Christ who does not redeem."[^30] Contrary to this highly dubious opinion, Franklin in one concise sentence remarks: "But the myth which the sailors in Billy Budd make does not destroy, but saves them."[^31] It is clearly evident that no matter which way one observes Billy Budd, whether it be Adamic, Druidic, or Judaeo-Christian, his most central symbolic function is as an avatar of Christ.

[^30]: Rathbun, p. 25.
[^31]: Franklin, p. 189.
CHAPTER III

DANSKER

Since Billy Budd represents the Christ figure and Captain Vere is the embodiment of God the Father, proceeding one step further, it would be logical to assume that Melville would also employ the Third Person of the Trinity in this work.¹

The Holy Spirit in theology is often represented by one or more main attributes or by a number of diverse symbols; therefore, the third part of the Trinity might appear under various semblances in a work with theological underpinnings. With his obvious command of theological detail, it seems reasonable to assume that Melville would use the Holy Spirit in more than one of His many guises. Primarily, the Spirit is manifested in the character of Dansker, who possesses and projects qualities attributed to the Holy Spirit (e.g., Wisdom, Knowledge, Truth, Guidance, and the ability to draw order, form, and beauty out of chaos). He also exhibits the main characteristics of the Paraclete.

The word "wisdom" is often used by Melville in direct reference to Dansker, exemplified in Billy Budd's thoughts: "At off-times the foretopmen had picked up some acquaintance

¹In Melville's Religious Thought, p. 24, Braswell states that, in his opinion, Melville was well aware of the Trinitarian concept of the Deity, and probably had no quarrel with it.
with him [Dansker] that he might be the sort of person to go to for wise counsel." And again in describing the old sailor, Melville says:

Was it that his eccentric unsentimental old sapience, primitive in its kind, saw or thought it saw something which in contrast with the warship's environment looked oddly incongruous in the Handsome Sailor?

The veiled reference to the "old sea Chiron" instructing the "young Achilles" is, although slightly obscure, a strong implication of Dansker's wisdom—Chiron was the wisest of all the Centaurs.

In like manner, Dansker's perception of truth is aptly illustrated in Melville's cryptic statement: "One person excepted, the master-at-arms was perhaps the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd." This is a significant passage, since it so strongly links Dansker and Vere in their shared philosophical and moral contemplations of a man of Billy Budd's nature placed in a situation such as the one that exists on the ship.

Knowledge, too, is evidenced in Dansker's cognizance of the situation that was to arise between Billy and Claggart. This knowledge is singular since no one else on board even suspects that Claggart finds Billy Budd repulsive, and is witnessed when Billy spills his soup, and it runs in front of Claggart.

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2 *Billy Budd*, p. 69.
Claggart makes an ambiguous comment: "And handsome is as handsome did it . . . ," everyone, including Billy, takes it as a joke; and Billy gleefully remarks: "There now, who says that Jemmy Legs [Claggart] is down on me!" Then Melville continues:

And who said he was, Beauty? demanded one Donald with some surprise. Whereat the foretopman looked a little foolish, recalling that it was only one person, Board-Her-in the Smoke [Dansker], who had suggested what to him was the smoky idea that his master-at-arms was in any peculiar way hostile to him.

The Holy Spirit is also known by the appellation "The Spirit of Truth." This essential property is evidenced in Dansker's role as a kind of Delphic Oracle. The following is a description of his reply to Billy Budd's query:

Something less un pleasingly oracular he [Billy Budd] tried to extract; but . . . Dansker thinking perhaps that for the nonce he had sufficiently instructed his young Achilles, pursed his lips, gathered all his wrinkles together and would commit himself to nothing further.

As the Oracle of Delphi made its statement of truth—whether about the past, present, or future—and elaborated no further, so Dansker (the embodiment of Christian truth) makes his declaration and speaks no more.

On two occasions, Dansker seeks to warn Billy of Claggart's impending treachery so that Billy can avert any possible conflict with the officer. But because of Billy's unusual nature, these attempts at guidance are unsuccessful. It is surely

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6 Ibid., p. 72.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., pp. 72-73.
9 Ibid., p. 71.
significant that, in the last instance, Melville describes Dansker's reactions to Billy's encounter with the pseudo-mutineer in the following words: "Upon hearing Billy's version, the sage Dansker seemed to divine more than he was told." Along with these rather strong hints of the unique role of Dansker as a guide and source of wisdom, more tenuous proofs of Dansker's faculty of guidance also exist. Although not sufficient in themselves, they do provide substantial supportive material. Dansker is alluded to a number of times as the old Merlin. Merlin, of course, was a great magician, but his chief calling was to serve as guardian and sole counselor to King Arthur. It is interesting that Camelot fell at Merlin's disappearance just as Dansker disappears from the text of the novel immediately preceding Billy Budd's "passion." There is another aspect of this association: Arthur has also been called a Christ figure, which adds to the probability of Dansker's role as divine wisdom.

In Melville's description of Dansker, he uses the word "ursine," and the obvious connotation is that his "bear-like" mannerisms are repugnant to the crew; however, knowing Melville's frequent use of astronomical terminology, this allusion may be carried to a high level. Ursine might well be a reference to Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, extremely important constellations in navigation. The "Big Bear" points to the "Little Bear" which contains Polaris--the North Star--the seaman's guide. While such reasoning is obviously speculative, it is the kind of

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10 Ibid., p. 85.
11 Ibid., p. 70.
symbolic connection Melville habitually makes.

Incorporated into the essence of the Holy Spirit is His ability to draw order, form and beauty out of chaos. This, too, is reflected in the interaction of Dansker and Billy Budd. The crew commonly refers to Billy as "Beauty." Dansker, when assaying the mysterious happenings affecting Billy Budd, brings form and order to these seemingly unrelated occurrences, affixing the blame to Claggart in clearing up the moral confusion. There can be little doubt that Dansker closely resembles the Paraclete—the advocate sent to defend and protect—a helper, patron, counselor, guide, and friend; certainly there are striking ways in which Dansker seems to represent the Holy Spirit.

Relatively speaking, Dansker has received very little critical attention. However, it is interesting to survey the critics who have dealt with this character, if only to see how they attribute the aforementioned qualities to him—yet do not draw any conclusion except that he is a wise old man. James Baird in Ishmael makes the following statements:

He is oracular . . . the voice of fate . . . a pure distillation of the ethos of the mariner's custom. . . . The primitive wisdom of the ancient Dansker is the least symbolized wisdom appearing in Melville's art. It matches the primitive flowing sea beneath the Indomitable. . . . The Dansker is wise with the weary wisdom . . . heavy with the knowledge of human error and distorted purpose . . . he is the seer of primordial wisdom. In the art of Melville he is the character who stands nearest to the pure archetype; he is the least symbolic sage, and the only one who may be assigned to that area of dream content in which archetype and nothing else is seen.12

In Roland Duerksen's article, "The Deep Quandary in Billy Budd," nothing more is offered than a mere paraphrasing of Melville's commentary on Dansker; therefore, he says as Melville has said, "Dansker is a wise old man." In much the same manner R. W. B. Lewis in his The American Adam presents a rewording of the same material. However, he does conclude with an interesting observation: "The Dansker carries the burden of awareness within the novella--awareness that 'the matter of Adam' is being tested again; and the atmosphere grows thick with echoes of Paradise Lost." When it comes to far-fetched parallels, Nathalia Wright, in discussing Melville's supernatural world, equates a palm tree with the Paraclete in Clarel. How much more logical, then, to attach that appellation to Dansker in Billy Budd. Nevertheless, she does give Dansker credit for being a clairvoyant such as populate "Melville's invisible world." It would appear that Wendell Glick has failed conspicuously to perceive Melville's intention. In his position, he chooses two directly quoted words--"bitter prudence"--and reworks them into what he believes is a valid interpretation:

The old ascetic Dansker had learned from experience a "bitter prudence" which had taught him never to interfere, never to give advice, in other words, to solve the problem of his social responsibility by

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13 Duerksen, pp. 61-62.
14 Lewis, pp. 149-150.
15 Wright, p. 23.
16 Ibid., p. 183.
escaping into a shell of cynicism, and by so doing had disqualified himself for service to society.\textsuperscript{17}

It is understandable how Glick took this direction since the passage can be easily distorted when taken out of context. But Melville's stress on Dansker's unique wisdom necessitates some more positive view of his role.

In a sometimes perceptive work, \textit{Melville's Quarrel with God}, Lawrence Thompson comments on the nature of Dansker. Thompson has more thoroughly than others expressed the importance of Dansker, with the possible exception of Baird, and has scrutinized Dansker enough to suggest undertones of the mystical knowledge of the extraordinary man—a man who might have written works like the \textit{Cabala}. Thompson begins by saying that Dansker "is a subordinate whose importance is that of commentator on the action. . . . His wisdom is the dark wisdom of Solomon."\textsuperscript{18} In addition, Thompson claims that Dansker's scar, which he received in battle, is not only symbolic but allegorical as well. He further elucidates:

For the narrator, the analogy with "a streak of dawn's light" is merely of descriptive value; for Melville the analogy has a woeful allegorical value: the old Dansker knows the worst about both God and man. His bitter profit from having eaten the apple of knowledge is that he can easily evaluate and predict the price Billy Budd must pay for being innocent and ignorant.\textsuperscript{19}

At this point Thompson launches into a long paraphrase of a section of the novel which is of little value here. The knowledge

\textsuperscript{17}Wendell Glick, "Expediency and Absolute Morality in \textit{Billy Budd}," \textit{PMLA}, LXVIII (March, 1953), 107.

\textsuperscript{18}Thompson, p. 375.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid.
that Thompson attributes to Dansker would not necessarily have
to have been attained by actual experience. For God—unlike
man—knows the worst of things without ever having eaten the
apple; and in his omniscience, he too can predict what will hap-
pen to Billy Budd in his innocence. Thompson ends his section
on Dansker by equating him with Melville. He asserts that each
"has been driven by his own 'pithy guarded cynicism' to represent
his meaning in riddles, and at this late stage in his life he will
'commit himself to nothing further' as to his meaning."\(^\text{20}\) In like
manner, Milton Stern reiterates and improves the discussion of
Dansker's scar—which Stern calls "the emblem of the insights
gained through the experience which has earned him his nickname."\(^\text{21}\)
Notwithstanding, he slips back into the mode of the majority of
the critics with this passage:

The Dansker, for instance, at first is merely amused
by the incongruity of a being like Billy aboard the
Indomitable. At first it is merely the amusement of
wondering how, when, and where the pretense will be
destroyed by the inevitable initiation. But as the
Dansker becomes aware that Billy is what he seems to
be, the Dansker's amusement disappears in thoughtful
consideration of the symbolic situation which inno-
cence and the inevitable initiation imply.\(^\text{22}\)

At least Stern finds a deepening in Dansker, which is a step in
the right direction.

In addition to implicating the Holy Spirit in Dansker,
Melville may intend to make use of the ship itself. When the

\(^{20}\)Ibid., p. 377. In general, Thompson tries to give a
negative twist to his data.

\(^{21}\)Milton R. Stern, The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman

\(^{22}\)Ibid.
"ark" is used as a symbol, it normally represents the Christian Church. In this case the "ark" is the man-of-war, Bellipotent, and it is guided as in Christian symbolism by the Holy Spirit in the form of water and wind.

The luminous cloud is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It seems quite likely that the Holy Spirit appears as the luminous cloud in the descriptive narrative regarding the night before Billy Budd's execution, a further manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Dansker's deep, intimate knowledge of wind and water also is noteworthy as corroborative evidence. It is almost certain that Melville intended the Holy Spirit to be present in Billy Budd, developing Dansker and perhaps these other symbols to invoke its essence. Such an assumption explains the deep and secret connection, the shared inner knowledge, that Melville established between Vere, Billy, and Dansker.

As can be readily seen, there is very little critical material probing Dansker's role deeply. It would seem that the

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23 The origins are these: Latin Bellum, i - war; or Bellus, i - pretty; and potentia, ae - might, force or power. In the case that the "Belli" refers to "war," it could be considered "the force of war," which ties in with the type of ship-man-of-war. The force of "pretty" makes little sense; but if it is expanded to "beauty," it could mean the "force of 'Beauty'" --Billy's nickname. See also Franklin, p. 198. He states: "The first half of Bellipotent is a complicated pun combining a Latin word for war, several of the names of Billy Budd's divine Celtic prototype, and the apparent meaning of these names; the second half suggests that this combination may triumph. Thus the name of the ship is a variation of Billy Budd's own name." It is also possible that the hints of beauty and power simply point to the idea of God.

24 See Miss Wright, passim, who makes note of the great amount of water symbolism in Melville's novels; however, she does not specifically refer to Billy Budd.

reason for this is that most critics consider him a minor character. He is a minor character only in the sense that he does not appear as often in the narrative as other characters do. But it must be remembered that the Holy Spirit is not frequently mentioned in the Bible, and plays in general a subtle, hidden role. The evidence is at least strong enough to establish the likelihood that Melville works in a Trinitarian pattern, and that the work is structurally integrated by it.
CHAPTER IV

CLAGGART

The way in which Claggart lies in wait for Billy establishes ties with the Biblical description of Satan in Genesis:

Then the Lord God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals, and among all beasts of the field; on your belly shall you crawl, dust shall you eat, all the days of your life. I will put enmity between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for his heel."

Certainly the direct antithesis of the Holy Trinity, in the interest of symmetry in the novel, would be a Triune Evil, and this to some extent exists in Billy Budd. The embodiment of this trinity is handled in a most unusual manner. Melville takes three historical characters and incorporates them into one individual—John Claggart, the master-at-arms. These three characters are prototypes of three distinct gradations of evil: evil of convenience as witnessed in Pontius Pilate, evil of intent as seen in Judas Iscariot, and innate corruption as found in the Miltonic Satan.¹

¹Cf. James E. Miller, Jr., "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin," PMLA, LXX (March, 1955), 91, 99. It is interesting to note that Miller, in this article, decides that Hawthorne distinguishes three distinct types of "sin" rather than three distinct types of evil. They are the revealed sin of Hester, the concealed sin of Dimmesdale, and the unpardonable sin of Chillingworth. This third type he finally equates with
This innately corrupt Satanic part of Claggart sees the goodness in Billy and is jealous; and because he cannot possess it, he decides to destroy it. Here, tones of homosexuality on a natural plane appear. Levin says this:

Toward him [Billy] the jet curled Claggart, master-at-arms, feels an antipathy which might have been sympathy, an animus which is clearly attributable to a frustrated homosexual impulse, though it is set forth as an ethical contrast rather than as a psychological motive.²

To accomplish Billy's destruction, Claggart appeals to his Judas-characteristic and decides to falsify evidence against Billy. However, when confronted by Vere, he chooses the easier way out, as did Pilate, and does not back down on his statement.

John Claggart's position aboard the ship as master-at-arms is described as "sort of chief-of-police."³ Basically this was the position Pilate held as Procurator of Judea. Melville insinuates that Claggart's position is on shaky ground because of past faux pas. According to The Works of Flavius Josephus, the "Winchell column" of that period, Pilate made the ground in Rome shake by three major indiscretions committed before the death of Christ.⁴ This was particularly disconcerting to Pilate

Satan. Melville could have derived some of his versions of evil from Hawthorne—or at least had his own position confirmed to a degree.

²Levin, p. 195. Cf. Richard Chase, Herman Melville, pp. 263–264; and Watson, p. 324. Watson implies in his article that evil, Claggart, desires good (Billy) in order to be complete.

³Billy Budd, p. 64.

⁴Pilate's fiascos are: (1) bringing banners and graven images (against Mosaic Law) into the city of Jerusalem, (2) confiscating temple funds to build an aqueduct, (3) slaying
because not only was Tiberius Caesar his emperor, he was also his father-in-law—the one who got him the job in the first place. Pilate was recalled to Rome, reprimanded and returned to Judea with orders to improve or else. So when Christ was brought before him, rather than upset the Jews, he condemned an innocent man—this was an evil of convenience. Also for convenience, Claggart decides to maintain his lie even when he is given an opportunity to admit it because he, too, has much to lose by being honorable.

Intimations by Melville lead to the assumption that Claggart is not English. His origins are as hazy as Judas Iscariot’s:

Nothing was known of his former life. It might be that he was an Englishman; and yet there lurked a bit of accent in his speech suggesting that possibly he was not such by birth, but through naturalization in early childhood.⁵

Pilate, of course, is not a native of Palestine either.

Melville also associated Claggart with Ananias, a known liar and hypocrite of the New Testament, whose place is usurped when Judas commits the most heinous sin of prevarication and hypocrisy of all time. Claggart is said to have advanced rapidly aboard the Bellipotent as the unknown Judas Iscariot became Apostle and then treasurer of the group. As Judas pointed out Christ, Claggart creates a false mutiny involving Billy—Christ indiscriminately rioters and innocent alike—including some Galileans—which did not help his relations with Herod.

⁵Billy Budd, pp. 64-65. Another interpretation of this fact is presented in Thompson, p. 374. Thompson overlooks that other personalities alluded to in the novel have more vague backgrounds than Satan.
was accused of blasphemy and desiring a temporal kingdom as

Billy is also accused of wanting to overthrow rightful author-

ity and assume an undeserved leadership. This evil is one of

intent. Claggart, like Judas, knows exactly what he is doing;

he has schemed and plotted to achieve the situation that allows

him to tell his great lie. This is his intention from the first—

he decides and acts upon that decision. 6

The Miltonic Satan is also effectively infused in the

carer of Claggart; 7 Melville implies the serpentine char-

acteristics of Claggart which are commonly found in literature

referring to Satan. 8 As a snake hides under rocks, Claggart

is pale and ghastly, "... in part the result of his official

seclusion from the sunlight ...," 9 and also from "... some-

thing defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood." 10

6 Cf. Wright, p. 72. Regarding Judas, she says: "There-

fore, while Budd, Claggart, and Vere correspond in general to

Jesus, Judas, and God in the Crucifixion story, they do so as

symbols rather than as personalities and are thus aspects of

Melville's themes rather than of his characterization." The

last of this statement, of course, has been rejected previously.


Chase says "Billy Budd's 'Harmlessness' fills Claggart with both

longing and revulsion at the same time that Budd's physical

beauty attracts him. Like Milton's Satan, thinking of the Gar-

den, Claggart is capable of looking at Billy Budd and weeping

'feverish tears.' He weeps at being unable to put off the bur-

den of civilization and be 'harmless.' But in less regressive

moments he can feel the active bitterness of the ambiguous at-

traction—repulsion which Billy rouses in him." This is also

discussed in Sedgwick, p. 234; Edward H. Rosenberry, Melville

and the Comic Spirit (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955),
p. 52; Geoffrey Clive, '"The Teleological Suspension of the Eth-

ical' in Nineteenth-Century Literature," The Journal of Religion,
XXXIV (April, 1954), 83-84; and Stern, pp. 226-227.

8 Cf. Lewis, p. 13, who notes some of these.

9 Billy Budd, p. 64.

10 Ibid.
He is, then, much like a cold-blooded creature. In describing
the look with which Claggart holds Billy's attention, Melville
states: "The first mesmeristic glance was one of serpent fasci-
nation; the last was as the paralyzing lurch of the torpedo
fish." The death of Claggart is accomplished in the same fig-
urative manner prophesied for Satan; his head is crushed. Then
after Claggart has been killed and Captain Vere and Billy Budd
attempt to move his body, Melville continues on the same theme:
"The square form flexibly acquiesced, but inertly. It was like
handling a dead snake." Stern reiterates:

The satanic imagery that incessantly characterizes
Claggart identifies him. . . . His dark pallor, his
isolation and "seclusion from the sunlight," the lurid
light comes to his eyes, the fact that he is an alien
about whose origins no truth is known, all indicate
the man who has been removed from humanity by a stone
heart which has been hardened in the man's own internal
hell-fires. The pale, high, forehead to which atten-
ton is called as one of Claggart's identifying features,
indicates mind and will as leading characteristics.

"Natural Depravity" is the term Melville applies to Clagg-
gart. In further describing this term, he states:

It folds itself in the mantle of respectability. It
has its certain negative virtues serving as silent
auxiliaries. It never allows wine to get within its
guard. It is not going too far to say that it is
without vices or small sins. There is phenomenal
pride in it that excludes them. It is never mercen-
ary or avaricious. In short, the depravity here
meant partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual. It

11 Ibid., p. 98.
12 Genesis 3:15.
13 Billy Budd, p. 99.
14 Stern, pp. 226-227.
15 Billy Budd, p. 75.
is serious, but free from acerbity. Though no flatterer of mankind it never speaks ill of it.

Now something such an one was Claggart, in whom was the mania of a 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."\(^{16}\)

In *Ishmael*, Biard uses the natural depravity of Claggart to make a Eucharistic symbol of Billy. Claggart, he says, is an irrational hero and almost Asiatic; accordingly, "He is a man without a motive for evil, save in his compulsion to render the world irrational in conformity with his own nature."\(^{17}\)

Like Claggart, Satan is of course innately evil. He is intelligent, having been the foremost of God's creatures before his fall. He has an insolent superiority, but his tragic flaw lies in the fact that he longs for but can never achieve perfect goodness; since he cannot attain perfection, he tries to destroy it. This is jealousy and envy epitomized—the same passions by which Claggart is enveloped. The discussion of Claggart in Mason's *The Spirit Above the Dust* is so precise that it is worth extensive quotation:

Yet the novel is a consistency; and Claggart has his universal symbolisms too, as significant in their less obvious way as the striking Jesus-symbols of the central character. Handsome and distinguished in feature, with dark curls clustering over a faint amber palor, without human antecedent or adherent, Claggart is at once repellant and attractive, a figure of character and purpose, defined against the level perfection of the handsome sailor with an almost refreshing


\(^{17}\)Baird, p. 426.
clarity. Because he is complex, Melville has a difficult task with him. Melville's great tragic period, when complexity and ambiguity were the air he breathed, had now been superseded by an era of simplicity, of allegory. Here mixed motive was not in question, but sheer stark Evil had to be present, to be confronted and refuted. Consequently Claggart is given devilry in plenty but is not allowed complexity; Melville's ranging imagination conceives the former and with considerable skill withholds the latter, modelling the man into an embodiment of evil that must necessarily conform to an almost primitive pattern of simplicity. For the reinforcement of the intensity of the drama his depravity has to be anatomised at some length; and in a long and thoughtful passage Melville calls in aid, only to reject, the Hebrew prophets as guides; and by a passing reference to the Calvinistic theory of natural depravity, leads up to an analysis of his "phenomenal pride" and his instinctive hatred of his spiritual opposite. Disdain and distrust of an innocence, that he would have shared if he had had the power, even of redemptive remorse, in his contemplations of the unconscious Billy is a subtle touch. . . . And Melville by quoting as epigraph to the section introducing Claggart the half-line "Pale ire, envy and despair" from the scene of Satan's approach to Eden, explicitly confirms the reference. Accepting it, we must accept a further reckoning along with it; that the Puritan tradition still lay closely upon all New England culture, and that in its context, Milton's powerful imagination had successfully grafted his own colossal myth on to Old or even New Testament legend. Consequently the Devil against whom the common run of Puritans strove was the Devil in the likeness of Satan of Paradise Lost, and therefore a reference to him carries with it in the nineteenth-century New England atmosphere many overtones of Christian association which elsewhere might not be implied. Accordingly in the conflict of Claggart and Billy there is new embodiment of the conflict imagined in Paradise Regained: though not confined to the Temptation (another episode in the Jesus story lightly symbolised in Billy Budd in the sporadic incitements to mutiny) but played out in the larger symbolic and religious context of Redemption through Sacrifice. . . . Thus Claggart's evil is predestined like Satan's; he obeys his destiny with just that touch of regret that adds poignancy to his character and situation. Thus too Billy's fate is out of his control; what sublimates his tragedy into a triumph is his ready and imaginative acceptance of it. 18

18 Mason, pp. 252-253.
Another interesting consideration is the parallel that can be drawn with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It is known that Melville, like most educated men of the time, had read and studied Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Canto XXXIV of *The Inferno* bears an interesting resemblance to Melville's novel in the manner in which the great sins are handled. Here, also, is presented a Triune Evil. Satan, evil personified, grasps in his claws three men: Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius. Melville also presents Satan and Judas, but, seemingly, no Brutus or Cassius, since they do not have as much theological relevance. However, when these three personages are equated to sin, something else is discovered. Judas was guilty of deicide; i.e., he betrayed and caused the death of Jesus Christ, God. Cassius and Brutus plotted the death of Caesar and are, therefore, guilty of regicide. Pontius Pilate also murdered a king, the King of the Jews, the King of Heaven, Christ. So Brutus and Cassius are at least relatable to Pilate. In any case, Dante's use of a trio to symbolize evil may very well have been a major influence on Melville.

These three then—Pilate, Judas, and Satan—appear to be a Triune Evil embodied in one person, John Claggart. Melville has effectively counterbalanced his other Trinitarianism with this arrangement. The Holy Trinity in reality is three persons in one God—in *Billy Budd* it is three distinct persons; in reality the three evil personalities were separate individuals—in *Billy Budd* they are one. The internal balance of Good and Evil is also evident; the three Evil counterparts are as well
developed and influential as the three forces of Good. Thus, Melville maintains balance and order in the novel in a tightness of theological intent which various critics have skirted the edges of and come close to demonstrating—without quite putting all the pieces together.
CONCLUSION

Some of Melville's critics, of course, have chosen to look for negative meanings in *Billy Budd*, ironies of various sorts. My interpretation moves in a different direction. Of course there are in *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* all kinds of ironies, ambiguities, and obsessions with evil which might well have carried over into *Billy Budd* to make it a dark and ambiguous treatise. Melville's interest in Pierre Bayle and Schopenhauer, for instance, might have loomed larger in *Billy Budd* and turned the novel towards pessimism.¹

Various philosophic traditions were introduced to Melville by Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* which Melville is known to have possessed. Melville loved odd bits of information and Bayle's *Dictionary* was surely the place to find many of them.² Bayle's ideas certainly influenced Melville. Miss Bell states:

Like Melville, who viewed with distaste the nineteenth-century transcendentalist denial of evil, Bayle had directed his tallest scorn against the ancient and modern Platonists, and particularly against his contemporary Spinoza, whose "absurd and monstrous

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hypothesis" it was that "There is one Being and one Nature, and that Being produces in itself and by an immanent action, whatever goes by the name of creatures." Bayle thus provided Melville with an arsenal of destructive logic against Goethe who would the "Fellow with a raging toothache" to "Live in the All!" or the Emerson who would opine that the true poet reattaches things to Nature and the whole--reattaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, by a deeper insight." For Bayle, in his attack upon older examples of the same view, exploited the argumentative strength of the dualist philosophies such as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, which recognize the independent reality of ill.  

Thompson in _Melville's Quarrel with God_ sees much of Bayle in _Billy Budd_. He feels that Vere represents a God of arbitrary and destructive power such as the dark deity described in the older philosophies of dualism. Thompson admits he is speculating, and says, "Perhaps I read too much into and out of Melville's fondness for Pierre Bayle; but as Melville so nicely phrases it in _Billy Budd_; 'one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford.'"

Gnosticism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism are all generally rooted in the same beliefs; these are summed up by Arthur Jeffery:

(1) A God so remote as to be beyond comprehension;
(2) contrasting worlds of light and darkness and an insistence on the evil origin of our material world; man is a fallen creature because of his creation as light entrapped in darkness; (3) a curious Docetic view of Christ as a disembodied spirit; and

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3 Millicent Bell, "Pierre Bayle and Moby Dick," PMLA, LXVI (September, 1951), 628.

4 Thompson, pp. 395-396.

5 Ibid., p. 396.
(4) a great interest in "astrological" matters concerned with the soul's journey toward the light.6

Among the dualistic philosophies introduced to Melville by Bayle, Manichaeism seems to be more influential in the structuring of Melville's philosophy and works than the others. Perhaps the reasons Melville found it appealing lie in two areas. First of all, it makes use of certain Judeo-Christian ideas, but not as its basis. It is a philosophy-religion that is derived by a method that does not always depend on rationality or logic to assert its dogma. It is not a Christian heresy, but a religious entity independent of Western influence. Certainly the Manichean doctrine of the duality of evil and good is a factor in the characterization of Claggart and Billy. Both represent forces of cosmic power. Still, Melville does not simply stop with the dualistic impasse. Billy Budd implies more of a reconciliation than a stalemate.

Manichaeism assumes that darkness and light are co-existent from all time and that all creation is composed of both elements in greater or lesser degree. This balance and equality of light and dark might well have satisfied Melville at the middle stage of his career, and, admittedly, a darkness which co-exists with light alleviates the ticklish problem of exploring how goodness could produce evil. Thus the solution offered by Mani is a tempting one, and Melville was tempted.

Some of the Manichaean logic is probably evidenced by the use of "light" features for Billy Budd and "dark" for

Claggart. This is the most sharply defined confrontation of light and dark in the novel, although a subtle interplay appears in other places as well. In any event, Pierre Bayle's Dictionary account of Manichaeism must be seen as a chief influence on Melville's speculations about good and evil, but the triune patterns I have tried to describe take Melville beyond this influence.

Schopenhauer also plays an important role in the novel's inception. Olive Fite in "Billy Budd, Claggart, and Schopenhauer" explores in detail what she believes is the important part that Schopenhauer played in the shaping of the novel. Briefly, she states that very few critics have even noted the possible connection between Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* and the hanging scene, let alone all the other possibilities. Miss Fite sees Billy as the "beautiful soul"—a man living in a pleasant and friendly world, almost at one with it in fact. He sees and understands his role in the overall balance of things. Claggart, however, sees only his distance and alienation from the world, and this to Miss Fite is "the man of sorrows" described by Schopenhauer. She draws this all together with a multitude of textual proofs, stating:

> It thus becomes obvious that the figure of both Billy and Claggart could very well have been shaped by what

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8Ibid., p. 340.

9Ibid., p. 342.
Melville read in Schopenhauer concerning the "beautiful soul" and the evil man. Other factors that unquestionably went into the composition of Billy Budd have been rated by many critics and commentators: the personality of Jack Chase, to whom the book is dedicated; the relevance of the Somers incident; the figure of Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost; and the author's observation of Claggart's prototypes—Jackson (in Redburn) and Bland (in White-Jacket). These undoubtedly were a part of the melange of ideas for which his reading in Schopenhauer perhaps served as a catalyst.10

Amid Braswell's discussion in Melville's Religious Thought of Melville's "Religious Background and Influences," he refers to Melville's profusely annotated volumes of Schopenhauer—especially in the four most popular of his seven volume set.11 The satirical or possibly ironic tone that seeps through occasionally in Melville's novel is all the more understandable when the lines of Schopenhauer that Melville has underscored are scrutinized. These are but three of his choice selections: "Where did Dante find the material for his Inferno if not from the world; and yet is not his picture exhaustively satisfactory? But look at his Paradise; when he attempted to describe it he had nothing to guide him, this pleasant world could not offer a single suggestion"; and in tribute to his fellows, Schopenhauer remarks: "They are just what they seem to be, and that is the worst that can be said of them"; and also, "When two or three are gathered together, the devil is among them."12

10 Ibid., pp. 342-343.
11 Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought, p. 15. See also Rosenberry, Melville and the Comic Spirit, pp. 87, 155.
12 Schopenhauer, as cited in Weaver, pp. 338-339.
It is evident that the influences of Schopenhauer and Bayle in *Billy Budd* are covert as well as overt. Melville has chosen from insights gained as well as particular points remembered. The novel, however, is not to be written off as pessimistic because of this obvious influence. Schopenhauer, incidentally, is not so completely pessimistic as is generally thought. He is in reality an astute and wry observer of mankind—an attribute that could have had only a positive and desirable effect on Melville. Schopenhauer and Bayle should both be seen as voices that Melville deeply assimilates in *Billy Budd*, and also as part of the dark, dualistic, and pessimistic conceptions of life that are transcended in Melville’s final balanced novel of reconciliation. In any effort to see *Billy Budd* as a positive document, Schopenhauer and Bayle deserve to be considered, but they do not dominate Melville’s point of view.

If *Billy Budd* embodies the theme of a Triune Good and a Triune Evil, then such a matrix contains elements essential to an understanding of the novel and of the metaphysical state of Melville’s mind at the time he wrote it. *Billy Budd* is a "testament" of sorts—a testament of man’s need to come to terms with the universe. Indeed, Melville’s metaphysical evolution parallels the development of his novel, a work which began as a mere headpiece to a poem, but which five years later at his death was a great novel.

In its first stage of development, *Billy Budd* was little more than a narrative accompanying the poem "Billy in the
Darbies." Billy is naive and innocent, but not quite the character that he later becomes; he is much like the "noble savages" that appear in Typee and Mardi, two of Melville's first novels. Innocence was an essential part of the new symbol that he wished to create. But as Melville grew, he found that the innocent are very often the victims of the wicked.

At this point, the general pessimism of Schopenhauer is witnessed—man's helplessness before an irrational universe in which there must always be conflict and tension as long as man insists on asserting his will against the Immanent Will, which tolerates no such actions. Moby Dick seems to lie in this area in that Ahab "wills" against the evil or, at least, the irrational element personified by the white whale. This action can only yield the destruction of Ahab as well as those working with him. Immanent Will tends to crush those who will to act on their own. In the second stage of Billy Budd Melville introduces a "new" character and the emphasis in the novel seems to shift sharply and focus upon Claggart rather than on Billy. Claggart is the irrational—that which destroys. It seems as if Melville dwells upon the permanent power of the irrational element at this point in the novel's development, since Billy hangs and there is no apparent mitigation of the pointless sacrifice.

Bayle's ideas about dualism are evident as well in Moby Dick and phase two of Billy Budd, but they appear to come to fruition in the later novel Pierre, and in phase three of Billy Budd. It is in these that the good and evil confront
each other on equal terms for the first time and the seeds of Manichaeism—the interplay of light and dark—are seen to produce unpredictable results in that either darkness or light may prevail. In this third stage a mediator of sorts is introduced. Captain Vere, in the late stages of the manuscript additions Melville produced, is made into a true force (until this time he has had limited existence as a judge but not as a personality). The dualism remains, but Vere is present now with the power to tip the scales. This is a crucial stage of the novel and marks a critical decision in the formation of Melville's philosophical-theological structure—for Vere and Melville almost imperceptibly tip the scales in the favor of good. Melville has attained his goal. He has found that his acceptance of the universe lay in the basic underlying balance and order in all things—a balance and order that is finally rational because it is tempered by a rational being, suggesting that the good may win the ultimate victory because of its very rationality, and the structure of *Billy Budd* conveys such a resolution.

Certainly the pattern of a Triune Good contributes significantly to the compactness of the novel. But the ultimate triumph of good can only be termed a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith." No one could have predicted what Melville would choose as the dominant force—in fact, predictions would probably have led in the direction of stalemated dualism. But in the end, it appears that Melville had become more orthodox than he has usually been given credit for being. This orthodoxy differs
in that he had fought his way through life to his conclusion while others never thought to question. His was a "leap of faith" made because the truth, as far as he saw it, was now before him. He could now accept and live within the universe. During what is assumed to be the final drafting of *Billy Budd*, he died in hope, if *Billy Budd* is a valid index to his final state of mind.

With a knowledge of Melville's predilection for balance, and the evidence in the novel weighed, it is reasonable to assume that this interaction between the Triune Good and the Triune Evil is what he intended to produce when he wrote *Billy Budd*. Such a wholeness of design, such a calculated balance of structure, accords well with the general tone of serene and assured judgment which almost all critics have noted in Melville's last major work.
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