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Melville's *BILLY BUDD* as "An Inside Narrative"

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AS WITH *Moby-Dick* and many other classics, it is possible to find different meanings in *Billy Budd*, complementary rather than conflicting, by reading it on different levels. One way of reading it which seems to me worthy of further exploration is as "an inside narrative," which Melville himself called it in a subtitle in parentheses. This phrase may obviously be interpreted in various ways. It may be taken merely to imply that the story is restricted to the inner life of a single ship. It may also be taken as a hint that the story is "inside" in a family sense, on account of the part played in the *Somers* affair by Melville's cousin Guert Gansevoort. But it seems to me that Melville intended the subtitle in still another sense. I believe that *Billy Budd* may justifiably and profitably be considered as an inside narrative about a tragic conflict in Melville's own spiritual life. The *Indomitable*, which may be regarded merely as a man-of-war, or, on another plane, as the world of Christendom, appears to me acceptable also as a microcosm, the world of an individual—specifically, the world of Herman Melville—and the story of what happened aboard the *Indomitable*, the symbolical projection of a personal crisis and the resolution of it. This is not to say that *Billy Budd* is an allegory, nor to argue that its symbols have fixed, rigidly restricted meanings throughout the narrative; in fact, the shifting similitudes and the rich allusiveness suggest new truths every time one reads the novel. Still, a general symbolical pattern may be discerned.

I

With the *Indomitable* a microcosm representing Melville, certain aspects of his being are dramatized in Captain Vere, Billy Budd, and Claggart. The divine, or semidivine, origin of Melville's being is suggested in the fact that Vere is of noble lineage and that Billy and Claggart, although their origin is uncertain, are reputed to have noblemen's blood in their veins. The King is a symbol of the Deity:

he does not physically appear in the story, but he is the supreme authority under whose law the ship operates.

Billy Budd and Claggart are contrasting symbols. Billy, the handsome, strong, lovable sailor, represents the good tendencies, the tendencies often designated as "the heart," and the epithet "welkin-eyed"¹ suggests a celestial quality. During his service aboard the *Rights of Man* it is said that a virtue goes out of him, sugaring the sour members of the crew. He is innocent as Adam before the fall. After he has been impressed for duty aboard the *Indomitable*, he is so unsuspecting and so unfamiliar with the ways of evil that at first he thinks Claggart likes him. Later he is horrified by the false charges that Claggart brings against him. He strikes his accuser the fatal blow only because an impediment in speech prevents him from defending himself orally.

Billy's character arouses pity, but so does Claggart's. In defining Claggart's evil nature, Melville suggests analogies between him and Milton's Satan, especially Satan's being cast into hell for his plot against the Deity and his part in bringing about the fall.² Claggart's history is obscure, but it is rumored that he "was a *chevalier* who had volunteered into the King's navy by way of compounding for some mysterious swindle whereof he had been arraigned at the King's Bench."³ His pallor is "in part the result of his official seclusion from the sunlight."⁴ While his office keeps him below decks, "welkin-eyed" Billy is a man of the top. At an unforeseen encounter of the two "a red light" flashes forth from Claggart's violet eyes "like a spark from an anvil in a dusk smithy."⁵ Yet, looking on Billy before he brings about his downfall, Claggart is filled with sadness, like Satan looking on Adam in the Garden of Eden. Claggart's lifeless body is compared to a dead snake. His depravity, like Billy's goodness, is according to nature. He is the only person aboard with the exception of Vere who is "intellectually" capable of realizing the moral phenomenon of Billy's character; yet, "apprehending the good, but powerless to be it," a nature such as Claggart's

¹ Melville's *Billy Budd*, ed. F. Barron Freeman (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), pp. 136, 192. References throughout are to this edition, as corrected by the *Corrigenda* published by the same press.

² Norman Holmes Pearson, "Billy Budd: 'The King's Yarn,'" *American Quarterly*, III, 99-114 (Summer, 1951), contains provocative discussion of Milton's influence on *Billy Budd*.

³ *Billy Budd*, p. 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

has no recourse left but "to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it."⁶ With freedom of will denied him, Claggart is doomed to the role he plays.

He has further symbolical significance. As Billy symbolizes the heart, so Claggart roughly symbolizes "the head." His brow is "of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect."⁷ A significant comparison of the two men points out that if Billy's "face was without the intellectual look of the pallid Claggart's, not the less was it lit, like his, from within, though from a different source. The bonfire in his heart made luminous the rosetan in his cheek."⁸ The intellectual Claggart's bleached complexion suggests that he is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. The contrasting symbolism of the two men is subtly indicated also in the fatal scene in Vere's quarters when Billy is confronted with Claggart's charges against him. Billy's impediment in speech here becomes a superb figure for the inarticulateness of the heart. Captain Vere's soothing words, instead of calming Billy, touch his "heart to the quick," so that, still unable to speak, he strikes Claggart a powerful blow upon "the forehead, so shapely and intellectual-looking a feature in the master-at-arms. . . ."⁹ A line not used in the final version, as transcribed by Freeman, describes Billy's blow as "electrically energized by the inmost spasm of his heart."¹⁰ The blow comes then, in effect, directly from the heart to the head. And as a result of it, Captain Vere is confronted by a crisis.

But this terrific blow of Billy's, this lashing out of the heart at the evil represented by Claggart—is there anything comparable to it, symbolically, in Melville's own life? I believe that there is. It seems to me that the part of the narrative leading up to the dramatic scene in Vere's quarters may be said to represent the early part of Melville's spiritual life.

With ruddy-cheeked, welkin-eyed Billy sauntering on the deck in the sunshine, joking with friends, and with the pallid, scheming Claggart slyly promoting his own interests below deck, but still not openly asserting himself, Captain Vere has no problem out of the ordinary to contend with. The relationship between heart and head

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228, n. 45.

in Melville's early life seems to have been, on the whole, well-balanced, with the heart somewhat predominant. There are signs of a dichotomy between heart and head at the end of *Mardi*, where all the travelers except Taji are converted to the religion of the heart practiced on the island of Serenia, but Taji sails out into the open sea in pursuit of the ultimate truth. Melville's next two books, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, show his compassionate heart in their fervent preaching of Christian charity, but there is ample evidence that during the period in which he wrote these novels he continued assiduously to cultivate the head.

Moby-Dick is predominantly an expression of the heart, but with a difference that sets it off from the earlier books. In addition to the compassion for mankind, there is now an impassioned hatred for the source of man's grief. In the early pages of the novel, when preparing for the entrance of Captain Ahab, Melville writes with admiration for the type of pageant character who has a "globular brain" and a "ponderous heart."¹¹ However one may feel about Ahab's brain, he is a man of greater heart than some critics apparently have realized. There has been a tendency of late in certain quarters to interpret *Moby-Dick* too much in the manner of a Sunday School pamphlet in which the sad fate of wicked, crazy old Ahab is intended to illustrate for Everyman-Ishmael what will happen to him if he is not a good boy. Obviously Ahab's intention is insane, as he himself admits, and from the beginning it is clear that he is doomed; but despite the tyranny with which his madness makes him drive his crew, he is a noble character with a capacity for great love. On an early appearance he is pictured, in a way to remind one of Christ, as standing before his men "with a crucifixion in his face";¹² and the Iron Crown of Lombardy which he wears was made partly of nails used in the crucifixion. He has one of those great hearts capable of feeling in one pang the sum total of pains diffused through feeble men's whole lives. He feels as though he "were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise."¹³ In a letter to Hawthorne, Melville said that "the reason the mass of men fear God, and *at bottom dislike* Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch."¹⁴ Ahab says that he himself

¹¹ *Moby-Dick*, ed. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York, 1952), p. 73.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 535.

¹⁴ Julian Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife: A Biography* (Boston, 1885), I, 404.

only feels, feels, feels; God alone has the right to think. His hostility toward God is based on his conception that God is without love for mankind. The plight of crazy Pip makes him exclaim, "There can be no hearts above the snowline."¹⁵ In the last days of the voyage the despairing Starbuck shows sound perception in addressing Ahab as "grand old heart," "noble heart."¹⁶

At first glance it may seem incredible that there should be a symbolical relationship between Captain Ahab and Billy Budd. Ahab, of course, is a much more complex character than Billy; and, in fact, it would be possible to point out similarities between him and both Vere and Claggart. But the parallels between him and Billy seem especially significant. Consider the conflicts in which the two men become embroiled. On the one hand, there are Ahab and Billy, symbols of man's naturally good heart outraged by evil, and, on the other hand, their adversaries, Moby Dick and Claggart, symbols of evil (to Ahab, Moby Dick symbolizes "all evil").¹⁷ One may smile at the suggestion that in the whiteness of the whale and the pallor of Claggart there is a subtle tie between the adversaries of Ahab and Billy. More important, Moby Dick is an "agent"¹⁸ of the Deity, to use Ahab's label, and Claggart, a petty officer in His Majesty's Navy, is likewise symbolically an agent of the Deity. Thus both Ahab and Billy rebel, in effect, against the highest authority: Ahab's "blasphemy" in harpooning Moby Dick is matched by Billy's "mutiny" in striking the master-at-arms during war. In both fables the symbol of the heart, when injured, strikes back in retaliation. It might be argued with some justice that Ahab brought his injury on himself, but as Billy incurred Claggart's enmity while going about routine duties aboard ship, so Ahab was on a routine whaling cruise when he first encountered Moby Dick. Melville uses the same figure, a firing cannon, to express the terrific feeling of the two men against their opponents. Billy's blow against Claggart's pallid brow is explosive, from "the heart": "quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck."¹⁹ And Ahab's chest is compared to a mortar which bursts his "hot heart's shell"²⁰ upon the White Whale.

The hero of Melville's next book, *Pierre*, is quite as violent as Ahab and Billy in his ultimate reaction to evil. Highly idealistic

¹⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 514.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 535, 558.

¹⁹ *Billy Budd*, p. 226.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 181.

and full of love for mankind, Pierre vows in the beginning that he will be ruled by the heart. His preference for heart over head is shown in his exclamation that "the brains grow maggots without a heart; but the heart's the preserving salt itself, and can keep sweet without the head."²¹ Pierre's following the dictates of the heart, however, his attempt to live according to the ideals of Christ, leads to such maddening entanglements that his love turns to hate. He fires his pistols point-blank at his chief antagonist in the evil world closing in about him. In prison he reflects on the joy he might have known had he been "heartless," but realizing that now he must endure hell in both this world and the next, he cries out his defiance of the Deity: "Well, be it hell. I will mould a trumpet of the flames, and, with my breath of flame, breathe back my defiance!"²²

There is no doubt that Pierre, Ahab, and Billy all had Melville's deepest sympathy. "I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head!"²³ Melville wrote to Hawthorne. But he ultimately realized that a rebellious heart could bring him to disaster—in fact, threatened to do so.

It is generally recognized that *Pierre*, a book of overwrought emotion, of indignation, represents a climax of some sort in Melville's life. It is one of the most baffling and most terrifying books ever written. Not long after it was published Melville's nervousness and strange behavior alarmed some of his family to the point of their having him examined for insanity. He was pronounced sane, but it is well known that he suffered much anguish during this period.

His condition soon after writing *Pierre* is symbolized, I believe, by the tragic situation aboard the *Indomitable* just after Billy has struck Claggart. The fact that the crisis in *Billy Budd* comes during a time of war when there is grave danger of mutiny suggests symbolically how critical matters were with Melville himself. Aboard the *Indomitable* decisive action is necessary to prevent possible anarchy. I believe that the action of Captain Vere in regard to Billy indicates symbolically how Melville, with his faculties threatening mutiny, resolved his own greatest personal crisis.

II

Before going into more detail about the symbolism, however, it is necessary to analyze the role of Captain Vere, because on whatever

²¹ *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Henry A. Murray (New York, 1949), p. 377.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 424.

²³ Julian Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, I, 404.

plane one reads the novel, he is the key figure. The good-hearted Billy Budd and the evil Claggart have inspired relatively little dissent among critics: one is inescapably good as the other is inescapably evil. The crux of the problem is what to make of their commanding officer, who alone sees and understands the situation, and yet, knowing Billy to be essentially innocent, summarily has him hanged for striking the blow that accidentally kills the master-at-arms. Most criticism of the novel treats Vere sympathetically, as a conscientious man who does his duty as he sees it. But some of the later criticism pictures him as a monstrous villain—a depraved martinet who enforces ironclad laws regardless of whether they violate individual rights. He is charged with overweening personal ambition, hypocrisy, and the abuse of confidence. His part in the trial scene is denounced as odious.²⁴

Melville himself makes no explicit judgment on Vere's part in having Billy hanged. In one very important sentence he puts it up to the reader himself to judge the reasonableness of Captain Vere's actions. Just after Vere has told the Surgeon that a drumhead court is to be convened immediately to determine Billy's fate, the Surgeon reflects: Why such haste? Should not Billy be confined and the case later be referred to the Admiral? Was Vere mentally unhinged? Melville says that the line of demarcation between sanity and insanity is as difficult to draw as the line between two merging colors in a rainbow, and then adds: "Whether Captain Vere, as the Surgeon professionally and primarily surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford."²⁵

Though Melville is ostensibly noncommittal, the way in which he narrates the story reveals something of his attitude toward Vere. Lawrance Thompson is alone, so far as I know, in assuming that the narrative passages in the novel as distinguished from the dramatic passages, to use his phraseology, are related by a stupid narrator whose admiration for Vere should not be attributed to Melville.²⁶ Unless more convincing argument than Thompson's is advanced, there is no reason for doubting that Melville intended himself to be

²⁴ For derogatory comments on Vere, see, for instance, Joseph Schiffman, "Melville's Final Stage, Irony: A Re-examination of *Billy Budd* Criticism," *American Literature*, XXII, 128-136 (May, 1950); "Letter from E. M. Forster," *The Griffin*, I, 4-6 (1951); and Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton, 1952), chap. xi.

²⁵ *Billy Budd*, p. 233.

²⁶ Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-360.

thought of as the narrator. As such, he uses a shifting point of view, looking now into the mind of one character, now into the mind of another, making general comments from time to time, and presenting scenes of dramatic action, but also shutting himself off from a scene entirely when he chooses.

He portrays Vere as both an admirable man and an excellent officer. Though not brilliant, Vere has a superior mind and a marked liking for books by authors who "in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities."²⁷ He has won distinction as an intrepid fighter. He runs a taut ship, but he has always acquitted himself as "an officer mindful of the welfare of his men."²⁸ In view of his role in the trial, his concern for the welfare of his men should be especially noted.

Vere is a man of firm principles, and Melville says it is well that he is, since he lives in the tempestuous era of the French Revolution. "His settled convictions were as a dyke 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." He disinterestedly opposed the theories not only "because they seemed to him incapable of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind."²⁹

It is impossible to appreciate Vere's actions without relating them to the world he lives in. Except in regard to the one particular allusion to it, the case of Captain MacKenzie and the three executions aboard the United States brig *Somers* during peacetime in 1842 should perhaps best be forgotten when one is attempting to analyze the character of Captain Vere, because in spite of what the historical incident may possibly have contributed to Melville's imaginative creation, what he tells about Vere is another story, about another man, at another time. There is particular significance in the choice of 1797 as the time for the action of the story. England is at war with France, now in the excesses of the Revolution; and England herself has lately been rocked by mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. The first of the mutinies was comparatively mild: the sailors complained about undesirable conditions and were granted concessions. But the Great Mutiny, which occurred the following month, was more "menacing to England than the contemporary manifestoes

²⁷ *Billy Budd*, p. 164.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

and conquering and proselyting armies of the French Directory." To the British Empire it was "what a strike in the fire-brigade would be to London threatened by general arson." Melville's vivid figures leave no doubt as to the devastating effect upon Christendom which Vere and other loyal Englishmen feared was imminent unless rigid control were maintained:

that was the time when at the mast-heads of the three-deckers and seventy-fours moored in her own roadstead—a fleet, the right arm of a Power then all but the sole free conservative one of the Old World, the blue-jackets, to be numbered by thousands ran up with huzzas the British colors with the union and cross wiped out; by that cancellation transmuting the flag of founded law and freedom defined, into the enemy's red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt. Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames.³⁰

After the mutiny had been quelled, it was feared that there would be further uprisings. To illustrate the precautionary measures taken at sea against such hazards, Melville points out that, with the fleet off the Spanish coast, Nelson was transferred to a ship just arrived from the Nore, with the hope that his presence would win back the loyalty of the late mutineers. Engagements with the enemy might take place at any hour. When they did occur, officers assigned to batteries felt it necessary at times to stand with drawn swords behind the gunners.

It is clear that Billy's fatal blow could not have been struck at a worse time. Though Vere would rather confine Billy and submit his case later to the Admiral, he feels it incumbent on him, as an officer responsible for the efficiency of a fighting unit, to act on the case immediately. Ironically, with Claggart lying dead on the deck, the essentially innocent man and the bearer of false witness have in effect changed places, so that Claggart, legally viewed, appears the victim of "the most heinous of military crimes. Yet more. The essential right and wrong involved in the matter, the clearer that might lie, so much the worse for the responsibility of a loyal sea-commander inasmuch as he was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis."³¹

Vere advises the court that Billy's intent is not to be considered,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235.

that the court must confine itself to the consequence of the blow. He knows, of course, that this is a hard doctrine for the young officers to accept:

How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow-creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?—Does that state it aright? You sign 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. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true, that in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free-agents. When war is declared are we the commissioned fighters previously consulted? We fight at command. If our judgements approve the war, that is but coincidence. So in other particulars. So now. For suppose condemnation to follow these present proceedings. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigour of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly that law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it.³²

To convict and yet mitigate the penalty would have a disastrous effect on the ship's company. Long accustomed to arbitrary discipline, the crew would be bewildered, Vere reasons, by seeing clemency granted a seaman who had murdered the master-at-arms: such a disposition of the case would be virtually an invitation to further mutiny.

Vere's speech to the court is the hardest thing in the book for readers to accept. E. M. Forster's and Eric Crozier's "tidying up" Vere in the trial scene of the libretto they wrote for Benjamin Britten's music resulted in Vere's not counseling the court.³³ But as Melville wrote the novel, there is no denying that Vere alone is ultimately responsible for the execution of Billy.

Billy Budd does not condemn Captain Vere. When Vere privately tells Billy of the verdict, what takes place between the two is not revealed, but with "each radically sharing in the rarer qualities of our nature—so rare indeed as to be all but incredible to average

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 244-246.

³³ See Forster on their feeling it necessary to "tidy up" Vere ("Letter from E. M. Forster," *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6). Their libretto was published by Boosey & Hawkes (London, 1951).

minds however cultivated"³⁴—Billy understands and approves what Vere has done. His final words, uttered just before his execution, are, "God bless Captain Vere!"³⁵ It has been suggested that this remark is ironical, but Billy, we are explicitly told, is incapable of conscious irony, and nobody has yet presented convincing argument that Melville meant the remark to be taken so.

Vere is portrayed as suffering more than Billy. The relationship between the two, suggestive as it is of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, and between God the Father and the Son, apparently enables Billy to understand that Vere's role is necessitated by his adherence to forms which he holds dearer than life itself—forms for which Vere ultimately gives his own life. "With mankind," Vere believes, "forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood."³⁶ In an ideal world, Billy would not be punished; but in the tense man-of-war world of which the *Indomitable* is a part, forms dictate the execution of a murderer if anarchy is not to prevail. The "union and cross" on the British flag—symbols torn off by the mutineers—represent "founded law and freedom defined" as against "unbridled and unbounded revolt." Vere agonizingly perceives the injustice effected at times by adhering to forms, but he sets imperfect order above anarchic disorder. After each of the incidents which emotionally upset the ship's company—the announcement of the verdict, the execution, and the burial—Vere maintains discipline through enforcement of forms, issuing routine orders that he knows the men will obey.

The chief reason for immediate action on Billy's case is that an encounter with the enemy might take place at any time, and any weakening of discipline might result in defection that would mean defeat. Soon after the execution, and before the *Indomitable* rejoins the Mediterranean fleet, there is an engagement with the enemy. The well-disciplined British sailors fight valiantly and win the victory. Vere himself is fatally wounded fighting for his beloved forms.

The internal evidence as a whole shows, it seems to me, that Melville looked upon Vere as a sympathetic character. There is also a bit of external evidence on Melville's attitude toward the tragically involved commander. On the back of the dedication page of the

³⁴ *Billy Budd*, p. 251.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

novel, Melville wrote the following annotation: "Both directly and indirectly the era lent emphasis to the difficulties professional and moral falling on Captain Vere by reason of the tragic event just recounted; difficulties not adequately to be estimated by the sea-officers of our time; and still less by landmen."³⁷ If readers of today, whether military or civilian, cannot adequately estimate the moral and professional difficulties that fell on Captain Vere, are they qualified to pass judgment on his resolution of the difficulties? The implication appears to be that Melville himself does not condemn Vere. The reader, of course, as Melville remarked, is free to judge Vere for himself.

III

As an inside narrative, *Billy Budd* reveals Melville telling his own story as objectively as he could, not with self-pity, but with self-respect. Instead of being called his "Testament of Acceptance," it might perhaps better be called his apologia. In the character of Billy Budd he presents, one may say, the dominant tendencies of his young manhood; in Captain Vere he presents in essence the later Melville. The name *Budd* suggests youth; in a manuscript line not used in the final version Billy, who is also called Baby Budd, is referred to as "a flower of masculine strength and beauty, a flower, scarce yet released from the bud."³⁸ The name *Vere* brings to mind the Latin word for man, *vir*. The crucial point in Melville's development came when he realized the necessity for curbing the wild, rebellious spirit manifested in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. The fact that the rebelliousness was inspired, in part at least, by the highest idealism was no justification for its being tolerated, especially since it threatened to destroy his whole being.

Nearly forty years before Melville wrote *Billy Budd*, he developed the theme, most notably in Plinlimmon's tract in *Pierre*, that the heavenly wisdom of Christ is not in accord with the wisdom of this earth, and that anyone who attempts to live strictly by heavenly ideals is likely to become involved in "strange, *unique* follies and sins."³⁹ At the time of writing *Pierre* Melville was so wrapped up in his idealistic young hero that he presented the coldly rational Plinlimmon in a very satirical manner. It is worth remembering that although *Pierre* proceeds to his downfall, he does not throw

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234, n. 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219, n. 88.

³⁹ *Pierre*, p. 250.

away Plinlimmon's pamphlet, but carries it about unknowingly in the lining of his overcoat—tucked away in his subconscious, as it were. The passing years brought about a change in Melville's attitude toward the teachings of the pamphlet. In writing *Billy Budd* he was sympathetic toward not only the Christlike Billy but also the philosophical Vere.

When Vere tells the court that in administering the laws of His Majesty's Navy they are restricted to considering the act alone, not the intent or nonintent, when he says that they are not responsible for the severity of the laws they administer, one should recall that as the King symbolizes the Deity, the laws in effect in His Majesty's Navy are symbolically the universal laws to which man must adapt himself, no matter what his personal opinion of them may be. It is only natural that Vere and his officers should be moved with pity for the essentially innocent sailor, but as commissioned officers their allegiance, as Vere points out, is not to Nature, but to the King, or God. The *Indomitable* proves its loyalty to the King by observing his rigid laws and by defeating the enemy ship, significantly named the *Athéiste*. Though this loyalty symbolizes Melville's realization that man must accept his place in the universal scheme decreed by God, one should not overlook the fact that the loyalty is based more on a sense of duty—in fact, of necessity—than on love. On the *Indomitable* it is Billy Budd rather than the King who is loved: the men preserve bits of the spar from which Billy was hanged as though they were chips from the Cross, and Vere's final words, uttered not with remorse, but with poignancy, are, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd."

At Melville's death there was found among his manuscripts together with *Billy Budd* a sketch entitled "Daniel Orme." Though it is too slight to have much value as literature, it is important as a brief symbolical self-portrait, and particularly so, in my opinion, since its kindred imagery and symbolism confirm much of what has been said here about *Billy Budd*.⁴⁰ There are striking parallels in the experiences of Orme and Vere.

Both men spend most of their lives at sea aboard battleships, and though Orme, retired at the end, has not been in command of a ship,

⁴⁰ On "Daniel Orme" as a self-portrait see William Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought* (Durham, 1943), pp. 124-126. Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York, 1949), p. 298, and Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1950), p. 288, both consider the sketch a self-portrait.

he has been a "captain of the top." Both men are respected by their shipmates, but both remain somewhat apart. Vere is suspected by the Surgeon of suffering mental aberrations, and, similarly, Orme is suspected by some of his shipmates of piracy, which here, as in "I and My Chimney," symbolizes insanity. Orme, like Vere, is wounded fighting for "forms." Across the crucifix tattooed over his heart he bears a scar, which it is intimated he received repelling boarders; and Vere, under the flag of the "union and cross," is fatally wounded fighting the *Athéiste*. In his last days Orme frequently contemplates his scarred image of the crucifixion, and Vere dies murmuring of the crucified Billy Budd. In view of Melville's sea-and-land symbolism, with the sea representing abstract truth and the land empirical truth, it is important that both men die in port: Orme is found dead near a battery of rusty guns on a cliff looking seaward; Vere dies not aboard the *Indomitable* but on the gun-studded Rock of Gibraltar. Both men die calmly, with no apparent remorse.

It is not surprising that in these two symbolical narratives the image of the crucifixion figures so prominently. For Melville it had long been an image of human life, more suggestive of man's suffering than of man's hope. Men are "Cross-bearers all," to quote a phrase from *Clarel*.⁴¹ In *Billy Budd* he develops the theme in all its magnitude; and for those who read the "inside narrative" he tells how he bore his own cross.

⁴¹*Clarel* (London, 1924), IV, xxxiv.