

BILLY BUDD AS MYTH*

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Among the American novelists, Herman Melville is definitely one of those most often mentioned by myth critics. In his *Mythopoesis*, a book devoted to the examination of "those myths which have seized the imagination of our classical writers who then transformed the various mythological accounts into a single, unified work of art," Harry Slochower cites only one American author—Melville.¹ Seeking to analyze some great American Renaissance authors' acquaintance with and use of myth, Robert D. Richardson, Jr. thus begins his chapter on Melville: "Herman Melville was better informed about and more deeply interested in problems of myth than any other American writer of his time . . ." and concludes that "[a]fter Melville's achievement, no one can doubt the powerful hold of myth on the American imagination, and no one has yet gone further than Melville in showing that its power is exerted as often for evil as for good."²

It is evident from the titles of some books—for instance, Nathalia Wright's *Melville's Use of the Bible* and G. M. Sweeney's *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology*—that they have as their goals the illumination of Melville's connection with the two fountainheads of Western mythology.³ Further-

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¹ Harry Slochower, *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 223-45. The quote is from p. 15.

² Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), p. 195 and p. 233. As for a brief account of Melville's knowledge of various myths around the world, see the long note on pp. 259-61.

³ Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969) and G. M. Sweeney, *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1975).

more, although undertaking the task to demonstrate "Melville's quarrel with God," Lawrance Thompson proves, if only paradoxically, the tremendous impact of the Christian thought on this literary maestro.⁴

Some scholars study Melville's works exclusively from the perspective of archetypal or myth criticism. For example, Edward F. Edinger applies the Jungian concept of *Nekyia*—the "descent to the underground" or the "journey to Hades"—to the interpretation of *Moby-Dick*.⁵ And Howard Bruce Franklin, after a detailed study of Melville's works, makes the following observation:

Melville's major works, taken together, provide a coherent and extremely valuable exploration of myth. Like any other study of mythology, they examine and compare particular myths of the world, theorize about the mythmaking process, and ask what meanings, dangers, and values reside in myth. But they do some things which no formal study of mythology can do: they use some of the world's myths as means of ordering and defining action; they dramatize the mythmaking process in action; they dramatically display the meanings, dangers, and values of myth by showing myth itself in action.⁶

Albert Camus's words might most concisely express the ideas of these critics, "Let us have no doubt about it: if it is true that talent recreates life while genius has the additional gift of crowning it with myths, Melville is first and foremost a creator of myths."⁷

Numerous mythic elements loom behind the gauzy mist of *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Melville's last product after thirty years of silence.⁸ This paper, therefore, intends to study it in terms of

⁴ Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952).

⁵ Edward F. Edinger, *Melville's Moby-Dick: A Jungian Commentary* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1975).

⁶ Howard Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 203.

⁷ Albert Camus, "Herman Melville," rpt. in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Billy Budd*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 90.

⁸ Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962). Hereafter all quotations are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

myth criticism, employing especially the concepts of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell. It is argued that with our focus of attention on the Handsome Sailor, this novelette yields much meaning in the light of myth—Billy Budd's discovery of the unknown father and his *rites de passage* from the First Adam to the Second Adam—Jesus Christ (or, to put it in another way, from Adam before the Fall to the Sailor Savior.)⁹

Even before Billy Budd is formally introduced, we have already been provided with the ideal image of the Handsome Sailor—young Alexander (p. 44), a marvelous admixture of strength and beauty (p. 44), a wonderful balance of the moral nature and the physical make (p. 44), and “Aldebaran among the lesser lights of his constellation” (p. 43). By way of classical and biblical allusions (young Alexander [p. 44], heroic Apollo [p. 48], strong Hercules [p. 51], pre-lapsarian Adam [p. 52], and a person “transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man,” [p. 53]) as well as animal imagery (the Assyrian priests' sculptured Bull [p. 44], “a blood horse” [p. 52], “the illiterate nightingale ” [p. 52], and “a dog of Saint Bernard's breed” [p. 52]), Melville gives us as much information about the young protagonist as possible in the most condensed and suggestive way. Therefore, by the end of the second chapter, the reader knows almost all the ins and outs, strengths and weaknesses, of the impressed Handsome Sailor—his masculine beauty, his simplicity and straightforwardness, his uprighteousness and un-selfconsciousness, his mysterious yet probably noble birth, and his “occasional liability to a vocal defect” (p. 53).

Billy Budd, aged twenty-one, the foretopman on a British merchantman, the jewel among the sailors, the flower of

⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960). See also Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), esp. p. 30 and pp. 245-46. As for the idea of Adam and Second Adam, see Carl G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, 2nd ed., trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 262.

Captain Graveling's flock, has no sooner made his bow than is arbitrarily impressed, in the King's name, by a naval lieutenant. Making no demur, the young sailor is transferred from the homeward bound merchantman *Rights-of-Man* to the outward bound man-of-war *Bellipotent*.¹⁰ Billy's submission to the impressment at once reflects the wartime necessity and his meekness. As a result, the former peacemaker on the merchantman has involuntarily become a fighter on the "ampler and more knowing world of a great warship" (p. 50) in the days immediately after the Great Mutiny.

Although like "a rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces and brought into competition with the highborn dames of the court" (p. 51), Billy with his "unpretentious good looks and a sort of genial happy-go-lucky air" (p. 49) wins hearty admiration from his fellow seamen except John Claggart, the Master-at-Arms. Melville also uses biblical images to reveal the evil nature of Claggart, the Archfiend in the man-of-war world. His envy of Billy is deeper than that of Saul's at the comely young David (p. 78). Bringing the false accusation against Billy in front of Captain Vere, Claggart bears "a look such as might have been that of the spokesman of the envious children of Jacob deceptively imposing upon the troubled patriarch the blood-dyed coat of young Joseph" (p. 96). Moreover, the devilish Master-at-Arms, tall and spare, is compared to a serpent as well as a scorpion (p. 78), and his corpse, a dead snake (p. 99). To make explicit his meaning, Melville further imposes the Platonic idea of "Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature" (p. 75) on Claggart.

Among all critics, Franklin is perhaps the one who discerns

¹⁰ Milton R. Stern points out that "In *White-Jacket* Melville used the ship image precisely in the way it was to be used repeatedly in other books: the homeward bound ship is the ship bound to heaven, to something final and absolute. The outward bound ship, whether wrongly or rightly directed, is the actual state of the world, ever seeking, ever subject to the dark waters of new and unknown experiences, ever plowing new paths in the boundless waters of infinite relativity." *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957), p. 216. In addition, no one will miss the significance of the names of the merchantman *Rights-of-Man* and the warship *Bellipotent*.

most clearly the mythic significance of the name of the Handsome Sailor:

Billy Budd is the only one of Melville's protagonists who actually bears the name of a god. Curiously, he bears at one time the name of two gods. . . . [B]oth his first name and his last name are names of a particular Western god upon whose mythology and rites Melville constructed *Billy Budd*. This god is the god known as "the Celtic Apollo."¹¹

He goes on to point out that Billy's being unequivocally compared to three Greek gods—Hyperion, Hercules, and Apollo—culminates in Apollo and this story is the sun-god myth.¹²

Before his enforced enlistment to the warship, Billy Budd, with his beauty, strength, innocence, and good will, is worshipped by all his fellow seamen and, to Captain Graveling, is the acknowledged peacemaker on the *Rights-of-Man*. Instead of *Indomitable*, *Bellipotent* is Melville's final choice for the name of the man-of-war.¹³ Franklin thus interprets the significance of the *Bellipotent*:

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 variant of Billy Budd's own name.¹⁴

In my opinion, the name *Bellipotent* conveys a very strong mythic meaning if we regard it as "belly" and "potent," suggesting the mighty and powerful belly of the whale. During the rites of passage, according to Campbell, the hero is swallowed into the belly of the whale and undergoes a series of physical and mental sufferings before he is well-qualified to re-pass the threshold of adventure and brings, as a regenerated hero, the boon which restores the world.¹⁵ Therefore Billy Budd, the Noble Savage and Adam before the Fall, is impressed, under

¹¹ Franklin, pp. 191-92.

¹² Franklin, p. 192.

¹³ Hayford and Sealts, p. 8 and pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ Franklin, p. 198.

¹⁵ See, Campbell's discussion of "The Belly of the Whale," pp. 90-94.

wartime necessity, from the *Rights-of-Man* to the *Bellipotent* and is destined to go through many a poignant trial before he is received to his father's bosom and has his position acknowledged in the eyes and hearts of all sailors. Billy Budd on the *Bellipotent* is virtually Billy *Agonistes*—Billy under trial.

Another stamp of Billy Budd's mythic nature is his miraculous birth.¹⁶ Aboard the *Bellipotent*, the impressed young hero is asked by the officer of his birthplace and father, among other routine questions. The answers given by Billy and his simplicity in answering them astonish the officer:

"... Please, sir, I don't know."

"Don't know where you were born? Who was your father?"

"God knows, sir."

Struck by the straightforward simplicity of these replies, the officer next asked, "Do you know anything about your beginning?"

"No, sir. But I have heard that I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man's door in Bristol."

(p. 51)

This dialogue unfolds the story in the direction of myth. For it reveals Billy's probably noble yet mysterious birth and hints at the "theme of the infant exile and return."¹⁷ As we will see, at the end of the story, Billy Budd not only is restored his lost identity in his connection with Captain Vere, but also gains, through many severe tests, his new identity as a Sailor Savior.

The Handsome Sailor's androgynous character also strikes a mythic note. Androgyny, the status of having both male and female in one, is "not uncommon in the world of myth."¹⁸ We are told by Melville right from the beginning of Billy's marvelous combination of strength and beauty. In addition to the

¹⁶ Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949). Kerényi discusses "the wonderful orphan child" on p. 40 and Jung discusses "the miraculous birth" on p. 85. Also see Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Campbell, pp. 321-25. See also Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954), p. 175.

¹⁸ Campbell, p. 152. Philip Wheelwright also regards the Androgyne as an archetypal pattern. See his *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1954), p. 141.

descriptions attached to Billy's female aspects, the novelist compares the foretopman to "a rustic beauty" (p. 51), "a condemned vestal priestess" (p. 99), and his stammer to Georgiana's fatal birthmark in Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" (p. 53). The co-existence of both sexes in a single organism, androgyny is an ancient and universal formula signifying "*autonomy, strength, wholeness*" and that "to say of a divinity that it is androgyne is as much as to say that it is the ultimate being, the ultimate reality."¹⁹ Billy the potential god, however, has yet to get rid of his terrestrial qualities.

The first incident that shakes Billy's mental equilibrium is the gangway-punishment on the day following his impressment. A young afterguardsman is flogged by the executioner for his negligence of duty. Watching the red welts on the culprit's naked back and his dire expression, the horrified Billy rushes to "bury himself in the crowd" (p. 68). This is his first confrontation with the cruel inhumanity of the man-of-war world and his first chance to "put off the infantile ego."²⁰ His reaction being fear, the innocent hero fails to adjust himself properly to the condition before him. The flogging event serves both as an irony and as a contrast. For the horrified novice who makes up his mind that "never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof" (p. 68) is the very one aboard who later kills his superior officer in wartime. This incident, in which the impressed foretopman shows fear and terror, is also a contrast to the hanging scene, where Billy is characterized by calmness and composure. Unaided by anybody, Billy Budd has to grope his own way during his first couple of days in this alien and hostile world.

Then, Billy finds petty troubles befalling upon him. Surprised and bewildered, he comes to enquire of the old Dansker

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 175.

²⁰ Campbell, p. 62.

—the archetypal Wise Old Man in the story. The Merlin-like sailor in possession of “eccentric unsentimental old sapience” (p. 70) has a certain curiosity in Billy’s radical innocence which is extremely incongruous with the man-of-war environment and also clearly sees through Claggart’s innate hostility toward the innocent hero. The “threshold guardian” of Baby Budd in his adventure into the unknown, the old Dansker with his laconic prophecy tries to “assist the hero through the trials and terrors of the weird adventure.”²¹ However, deceived by the sweet voice and pleasant words of the sinister Master-at-Arms, the “young Achilles” neglects the advice of “the old sea Chiron” (p. 71).²² The affair of the spilled soup on the second day further confirms Billy’s conviction of the Master-at-Arms’s good will. Innocence being his blinder, the Adamic figure fails to pierce through the delusive appearance of the Devil Incarnate.

Claggart’s spontaneous hatred toward the innocent young sailor and his hopelessness to cross “the deadly space between” his Natural Depravity and a normal nature (p. 74)—not to mention the immeasurable distance from a normal nature to Billy’s constitutional innocence—are reminiscent of Satan’s despair of and hatred against Adam in the Bible and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.²³ A reproduction of the archetypal Satan with

²¹ Campbell, p. 9 and p. 77.

²² The Greek allusions here are apt, for Achilles and Billy are both men of physical brilliance, worshipped by their fellows, handicapped by their mortal flaws (Billy’s vocal impediment is to the Handsome Sailor what Achilles’ heel is to the Great Warrior), and victimizing as well as victimized by their outbursts of anger. The comparison of the old Dansker to Chiron is also suitable, for the latter, though one of the centaurs, is marked by his knowledge, wisdom, gentleness, and willingness to render instructions.

²³ As mentioned earlier, Billy is several times explicitly referred to as an “upright barbarian” (p. 52), “Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company” (p. 52), and “in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall” (p. 94). Claggart is compared to a serpent, a scorpion, and a dead snake. Also, in describing the officer’s envy and antipathy toward the foretopman, Melville once in his manuscript entitled Chapter 12 “Pale ire, envy and despair,” alluding to the forces working in Satan when the Archfiend first saw Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (but

his hurt pride, perverted will, and forlorn hope, the malign Master-at-Arms disarms the Handsome Sailor with his pleasant words, yet slyly sets out on his vicious scheme. The sending of a secret emissary to Billy at night to bribe him into promising to help out in the event of a mutiny is but the next action in his whole design. Shocked by the wicked proposal, Billy stutters his threat to toss the tempter into the sea. This is the first time Billy shows his vocal impediment in time of excitement, though we have already been told about it. His threat, together with his punch of the Red Whiskers on the *Rights-of-Man* (p. 74), reveals his fatal strength and foreshadows its catastrophe. Ironically, the violence done on the merchantship wins the Red Whiskers' loyal friendship, but on the man-of-war it claims his life.²⁴

As we have seen, Billy Budd has twice overlooked the advice of the Wise Old Man and passed, by himself, through the threshold of adventure into darkness and dangers. In the meantime, Claggart the Archfiend, disappointed by his cat's-paws' failures, is forced to come to the fore in order to carry out his iniquitous design.

Under the very energetical truth-seeking Captain Vere's order, the groping Adamic Baby Budd confronts vis-a-vis the "sweet-voiced" serpentine Master-at-Arms.²⁵ Dumfounded by Claggart's false accusation of mutiny and prompted by Vere's fatherly words, Billy Budd can only defend himself with fist, rather than with tongue. Billy's fatal and helpless violence

mistaking "pale" for an adjective). See Hayford and Sealts, p. 165. The original lines are: ". . . each passion dimm'd his face, / Thrice chang'd with pale, ire, envie, and despair,/Which marr'd his borrow'd visage, and betraid/Him counterfet . . ." Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV, 114-17.

²⁴ For an explanation of the conflict and military initiation, see Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954), p. 29.

²⁵ In his introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Billy Budd*, Vincent explores the different connotations of the name Vere—"Vere" also suggests the Latin word for 'truth,' *verus*, while the Latin *vir* may suggest Vere's 'power' or 'energy.' His name also suggests 'very,' which is an intensive. It is Vere who insists on the fulfillment of the orders which he has sworn to serve. He is a very 'very' man." See p. 8.

results from his stammer. Melville explains the significance of the vocal flaw as follows:

In this particular Billy was a striking instance that the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden, still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of Earth. In every case, one way or another he is sure to slip in his little card, as much as to remind us—I too have a hand here. (p. 53)

Hawthorne's interpretation of Georgiana's birthmark is similar to Melville's observation of Billy's stutter:

It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain.²⁶

Both Melville and Hawthorne regard their hero and heroine with their respective earthly imperfections as suggestive of Original Sin. Billy Budd's killing of the false-witness Master-at-Arms, therefore, is a suggestion of Original Sin, besides the commitment of an actual crime.

In mythic terms, the killing of the serpent or the dragon is "a central act in the sun-god myth" and signifies the transcendence of the status quo.²⁷ Hitherto, the childish innocent Billy rejects the old Dansker's wisdom and is blind to the evil nature of the Demon on the man-of-war. He is emotionally and intellectually unable to penetrate the treacherous surface into the heart of the matter. Mistaking appearance for reality, sweet words for genuine heart, he is shocked to the recognition of evil right before him and unable to cope with the sophisticated and experienced Devil. His simple act of violence is merely the projection of the inexpressible anger and fear in the presence of Natural Depravity and a childish

²⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark," in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Vol. II of *The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Riverside Ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883-4), p. 50.

²⁷ Franklin, p. 192; Campbell, p. 337; and Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 19. In Classical Mythology, both Apollo and Hercules, the two mythic figures to whom Billy is compared, kill serpents or dragons.

attempt to obliterate evil from his world. Billy's blow pronounces death not only to the evil Master-at-Arms but also to his own status quo. From this mortal blow onwards, the innocent hero undergoes a sea change.

At the court martial, having recovered from his shock of recognition and his violent act, Billy tells the members of the court his situation with fluency which surprises the court. The importance of the trial scene lies mainly in the intensification of the bond between Billy and Vere and the latter's long and powerful speech on the tragic discrepancy of moral scruple vs. military duty, Natural justice vs. King's justice, heart vs. head, private conscience vs. imperial conscience, and the Last Assizes vs. the Mutiny Act (pp. 109-13). While Billy states his case, Vere twice utters, "I believe you, my man" (p. 106). Billy's mental growth can be easily detected from his verbal defense for himself. He is now able to defend himself with tongue. However, he is not so intellectually mature as to answer all the questions put by the court. Asked by one of the judges, "Now why should he have so lied, so maliciously lied, since you declare there was no malice between you?" Billy turns "an appealing glance toward Captain Vere as deeming him his best helper and friend" (p. 107) and the fatherly Vere answers the question for him. At the end of the questioning, Billy for the second time turns a quick glance toward Vere. Therefore, some intellectual growth of Billy Budd is discernible and the consolidation of the Billy-Vere tie unmistakable.

Melville deliberately excludes the audience from the secret interview between Captain Vere and Billy Budd—"Beyond the communication of the sentence, what took place at this interview was never known" (p. 114). W. H. Auden rightly observes that:

Melville seems to have been aware that something must happen to Billy to change him from the unconscious Adam into the conscious Christ but, in terms of his fable, he cannot make this explicit and the decisive transition has to take place off-stage in the final interview between Billy and Captain Vere.²⁸

²⁸ W. H. Auden, "The Passion of Billy Budd," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Billy Budd*, p. 87.

Nevertheless, for fear that readers might lose sight of the important message hidden in this scene, the narrator ventures some conjectures. It is these conjectures that reveal the culmination of the link between these two magnanimous men and the sacrament performed by the fatherly Captain Vere on the young foretopman.

It is intimated that Vere makes a frank confession to the imprisoned sailor and Billy is joyous and proud of being made a confidant by and of Captain Vere. Melville makes use of the episode of Abraham's sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac to illuminate the sacrament on the *Bellipotent*. The incident on the warship, however, is much more powerful than that in the Bible. In the Old Testament, as soon as Abraham "stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son," an angel of the Lord appeared and stopped him.²⁹ The biblical incident is an abortive sacrifice while the one enacted on the *Bellipotent* is a fulfilled one. Or, to use Oscar Mandel's terms, the Abraham-Isaac incident is solely a "prevented tragedy," while the Vere-Budd incident, without any *deus ex machina*, is a complete one.³⁰ Consequently, Melville's counterpart of the Abraham-Isaac episode is complete and much more forceful than its original.³¹

What is remarkably noteworthy in this secret interview is Billy's discovery of and restoration to the unknown father. "The central myth of mankind is the myth of lost identity: the goal of all reason, courage, and vision is the regaining of identity," says Frye.³² Billy who possesses no knowledge of his father and birthplace is a foundling of lost identity. Yet in his adventures into the dark and unknown, the young hero is drawn closer and closer to the captain, the other magnanimous

²⁹ Genesis, 22:1-18. According to Eliade, this mock sacrifice is "an act of faith," *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 108-10.

³⁰ Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), p. 45.

³¹ For a comparison between the Abraham-Isaac incident and the Vere-Budd incident, see Wright, pp. 132-34.

³² Northrop Frye, *The Return of Eden* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 143.

character aboard. It is by way of trust, sympathy, and understanding that "two of great Nature's nobler order embrace" (p. 115). With his knowledge of the Captain's tragic dilemma and his reliance on his "father's" mercy, Billy is closely identified with Vere.³³ As Arvin suggests,

Whatever took place in the stateroom between the ideal father and the ideal son, its effect was indeed sacramental, an effect of the purest unction and the most complete reconciliation. . . . Ishmael, after so long a banishment, has been taken back to his father's heart. Billy's final words are an expression of rapturous surrender.³⁴

The closeted interview suggests to us the most tacit understanding between two men of "rarer qualities" (p. 115) which brings into effect the consummation of the father-son relationship between Captain Vere and Billy Budd, in addition to creating the tragic reversal of situation—"the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation" (p. 115).

After the secret meeting, Billy is transferred from the Captain's quarters to the upper gun deck. The ritualistic description of Billy's prison house is of great mythical significance:

On the starboard side of the *Bellipotent's* upper gun deck, behold Billy Budd under sentry *lying prone in irons* in one of the bays formed by the regular spacing of the guns comprising the batteries on either side. . . . In contrast with *the funeral hue of these surroundings*, the prone sailor's exterior apparel, *white jumper and white duck trousers*, each more or less soiled, *dimly glimmered in the obscure light of the bay like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at some upland cave's black mouth*. In effect he is already *in his shroud*, or the garments that shall serve him in lieu of one. Over him but scarce illuminating him, two battle lanterns swing from two massive beams of the deck above. . . . *Other lanterns at intervals serve but to bring out somewhat the obscurer bays which, like small confessionals or side chapels in a cathedral, branch from*

³³ Wright, p. 133; Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, p. 333; Campbell, p. 130. Elsewhere Campbell distinguishes two degrees of initiation: "From the first the son returns as emissary, but from the second, with the knowledge that 'I and the father are one.' Heroes of this second, highest illumination are the world redeemers, the so-called incarnations, in the highest sense. Their myths open out to cosmic proportions." See p. 349.

³⁴ Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (Toronto: George J. McLeod, Ltd., 1950), p. 299.

the long dim-vistaed broad aisle between the two batteries of that covered tier. (pp. 118-19, italics mine)

The cathedral imagery plays an indispensable role in the formation of Billy's mythic character. A cathedral is a sacred place where people worship their god, confess their wrongdoings and misgivings, as well as regain strength and peace of mind. "The one who enters the temple compound and proceeds to the sanctuary," says Campbell, "is imitating the deed of the original hero. His aim is to rehearse the universal pattern as a means of evoking within himself the recollection of the life-centering, life-renewing form."³⁵ It is obvious that Billy Budd in the cathedral-like prison has undergone the same process.

In addition to the cathedral imagery, the almost complete identification of the upper gun deck as a tomb and a womb also suggests death-in-life and life-in-death motifs.³⁶ The conclusions we draw from the secret interview find their well-grounded evidence here—Billy's agony "survives not the something healing in the closeted interview with Captain Vere" (p. 119). Also, Melville's observation of Billy's former agony resulting from "a generous young heart's virgin experience of the diabolical incarnate and effective in some men" (p. 119) dovetails Billy's rites of passage and spiritual growth. For we are shown step by step Billy's development from radical innocence to being tempted, to bewilderment, to negligence of the advice of the Wise Old Man, and to his violent reaction in the face of evil. However, aided by the fatherly Vere, he is able to face the cruel fact that there is evil in the world. Deeply moved by Captain Vere's trust and understanding, Billy realizes the value of human compassion and is restored to his "un-

³⁵ Campbell, p. 43. For more observations about temples and churches, see Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), pp. 25-26, 40-43, 58-65, and 75.

³⁶ In *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung mentions the idea of "church as womb," p. 345; in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, Eliade regards the baptismal font in the church as "the tomb and the womb." See p. 120.

known father." Therefore we are not surprised to find Billy's calmness on the eve of his execution, "for the son who has grown really to know his father, the agonies of the ordeal are readily borne; the world is no longer a vale of tears but a bliss-yielding, perpetual manifestation of the Presence."³⁷ Gaining recognition from his father, Billy in the tomb- and womb-like surroundings is reborn and is likened to "a slumbering child in the cradle" (p. 119), and in his trance, "a serene happy light born of some wandering reminiscence or dream would diffuse itself over his face, and then wane away only anew to return" (pp. 119-20).³⁸

To be a Sailor Idol, this new-born baby must also be recognized by the chaplain, the "minister of the Prince Peace" (p. 122) appointed to perform religious duties in the military world. Comforted by the fatherly Vere, Billy is unafraid of death and possesses a peace surpassing that the chaplain can offer. However, out of natural courtesy Billy receives but does not appropriate the chaplain's offer. All the chaplain can do is to stoop and kiss him on the cheek as a pious tribute to the reborn Handsome Sailor. So the chaplain's role is not unlike that of John the Baptist. Billy hence gains recognition from both the earthly captain and the celestial chaplain.

The assignment of the mainyard for Billy's execution strikes home the theme of the new-born god. The hanging on the mainyard—the tallest, central mast—resembles the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at the central cross which is, in mythic terms, the Cosmic Tree.³⁹ Speaking of "the symbolism

³⁷ Campbell, p. 148. He also says that, "The hero would be no hero if death held for him any terror; the first condition is reconciliation with the grave." See p. 356.

³⁸ "But death was not the end. New Life, new birth, new knowledge of existence . . . was given us. That father was himself the womb, the mother, of a second birth." See Campbell, p. 162.

³⁹ In his "Mainmast as Crucifix in *Billy Budd*," *Modern Language Notes*, LXXII (November, 1957), Vincent Freimarck remarks, "Surely to the captain, who admired and even loved Billy, it would have been intolerably ironic to hang Billy from the foreyard, in the very area of his faithful and outstanding performance of his duties as foretopman. And to Melville, in this story in which many allusions to the Crucifixion have been noted, the cruciform aspect of the main-

of the ascension into heaven by means of a tree," Eliade indicates that "the ritual post set up in the middle of the yourt is an image of the Cosmic Tree which is found at the *Centre of the World*." It is the very spot "where there is a possibility of passing from one cosmic level to another" and the one who goes through the flying journey "re-establishes the *communications* that used to exist *in illo tempore* between Heaven and Earth." By his ascension of the Cosmic Tree at the Centre of the World, the initiate becomes God's messenger.⁴⁰ The *Bellipotent*, a ship at sea with "water, water everywhere," is virtually the Centre of the World and the mainmast, the Cosmic Tree. Besides his function as a shaman-hero who by ascending the Cosmic Tree connects once again Earth to Heaven, Billy is himself "the navel of the world, the umbilical point through which the energies of eternity break into time."⁴¹ Therefore, the hanging, or rather, the ascension of the Handsome Sailor is not only a Christian crucifixion of the new-born Christ with his inborn innocence, acquired experience, and triumph over evil, but also a ritualistic transcendence over time and space. And Billy's last words—"God bless Captain Vere!" (p. 123)—are "the wind of life."⁴² They touch the hearts of all crew and uphold Captain Vere's loyalty-oriented decision. The mythical and religious undertone cannot possibly be misunderstood.

Also in this scene we come to realize that Billy Budd with his restoration to and identification with his father might be considered more Christ-like than Jesus Christ. "Why hast thou forsaken me?" Christ cried with a loud voice before his death.⁴³ However, Billy Budd knows that he is not abandoned

mast and the mainyard may well have been significant." See p. 497. Some painters also paint the cross as the mast. See Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, 2nd ed., trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), p. 258 and plate 120.

⁴⁰ Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 64-66.

⁴¹ Campbell, p. 41.

⁴² Campbell, p. 347.

⁴³ Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

by his father and that he and his father are one and the same. The description of the hanging scene is, as Watson hails it, "Melville at his very best, at his deepest, most poetic, and therefore at his most concentrated, most conscious."⁴⁴

At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of up-turned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn. (p. 124)

Billy's "pinioned figure" (p. 124) shows no motion, to the great surprise and wonder of all. Immediately following the hanging scene is a discussion between the purser and the surgeon about this singularity. The purser tries to give it "imaginative and metaphysical" explanations such as "will power" and "euthanasia," whereas the surgeon attempts a scientific one. However, this argument can hardly be resolved. (Another Melvillean ambiguity?) Even contemporary scientists fail to give satisfactory explanations of how a shaman can walk barefooted on the burning coals without getting hurt. Therefore, we had better accept this strange phenomenon as a further evidence of the Handsome Sailor's shamanic character.⁴⁵

The burial of the hanged foretopman, in contrast to Claggart's little-noticed burial, is another mystical vision: "As the ship under light airs passed on, leaving the burial spot astern, they [certain larger seafowl] still kept circling it low down with the moving shadow of their outstretched wings and the croaked requiem of their cries" (p. 127). Some of the symbolic meanings of the bird indicated by Jung might be applied here: "spirits or angels"; "one of those 'helpful animals' who render supernatural aid during the birth"; "the ultimate conquest of death"; "rebirth"; and "the renewed ascent of the sun."⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the drumbeat which plays an

⁴⁴ E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," rpt. in *Melville's Billy Budd & the Critics*, ed. William T. Stafford (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1961), p. 77.

⁴⁵ See, Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, pp. 87-96.

⁴⁶ Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, pp. 347-48.

important role in the shaman's flight to the Cosmic Tree here in *Billy Budd* both symbolizes the "true martial discipline" (p. 127) and accompanies the shaman-hero along his journey of transcendence over here and now and his ascension into Heaven.⁴⁷

The last three chapters (Chapters 28-30) form the second digression of the narrative.⁴⁸ The *Bellipotent's* triumph over the *Atheist*—symbolic of the victory of order over chaos, measured forms over anarchy—comes from the crew's adherence to the "true martial discipline." However, this adherence was once on the verge of destruction, had the Handsome Sailor not conferred his boon to other sailors and Captain Vere, the very man on whom human righteousness and sense of duty heavily rest. It might well be said that Billy's "wind of life" urges the crew to their sense of discipline and loyalty so as to bring about the eventual capture of the enemy ship. Billy Budd is a redeemer not only to his fellow seamen but also to Captain Vere, the representative of the naval code. With Billy Budd's name on his lips, Captain Vere maintains his judgment to the end of his life. To him, too, death is nothing to be afraid of. On the contrary, it joins the just and *severe* father to his meek and beloved son.

News from the Mediterranean, an authorized weekly, publishes the only historical account of the unfortunate incident. But the homicide aboard the *Bellipotent* is given the falsest version. The evil Master-at-Arms is described as respectable, responsible, and discreet, while the innocent foretopman, diabolic and villainous. It also praises Captain Vere's "promptitude of the punishment" which has proved effective (p. 131). Nevertheless, this false and wholly mindless account, the only record of the human institution, is now "superannuated and

⁴⁷ Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 64-65. For a detailed record of "the shaman's ascent to the sky," see Eliade, *Man and the Sacred: A Thematic Source Book of the History of Religions, Part 2 of From Primitives to Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), pp. 59-64.

⁴⁸ The first digression is Chapter 4.

forgotten" (p. 131).

In contrast to the inaccurate and long-forgotten institutional record is the judgment of the mariners' intuitive and collective wisdom. We are told early in the story about their "rude uncultivated natures" (p. 67). Therefore the sailors' idolization of Billy Budd as a Sailor Savior is primitive, unsophisticated, universal, and, above all, fair and square.

To them a chip of it [the spar from which Billy was hanged] was a piece of the Cross. Ignorant though they were of the secret facts of the tragedy, and not thinking but that the penalty was somehow unavoidably inflicted from the naval point of view, for all that, they instinctively felt that Billy was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of wilful murder. (p. 131)

The song in memory of the Handsome Sailor at the end of the story shows the sailors' worship of Billy Budd. To their instinctive minds, the young hero, instead of being a murderer and mutineer, is a man of magnanimity who by his meekness and generosity has conferred and keeps on conferring boon to all the seamen.

Hence the second digression focuses on the Handsome Sailor's impact on various aspects (the crew of the *Bellipotent*, Captain Vere, the inhuman and bureaucratic institution, and the sailors as a whole), or rather, their different reactions towards and interpretations of the innocent and noble foretopman. The sequence of these chapters cannot be easily ignored.⁴⁹ We are shown both positive and negative evaluations of Billy Budd. However, the negative one is long "superannuated and forgotten," whereas the positive one not only accompanies and comforts Captain Vere to the end of his life but also gives benediction to all the sailors. The holy image of the Handsome Sailor as the Sailor Savior is firmly established. As Franklin cogently observes, "Vere's intellectual truth and the sailors' mythical truth enclose the official lies, and

⁴⁹ In the "Editors' Introduction" to *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Hayford and Sealts point out that there is "a reversal of the order of his two final chapters so as to end the story not with the news account but with the ballad." See p. 8.

transcend, each in its way, the official order.”⁵⁰

To sum up, by using various folk, classical, and religious images and allusions, Melville makes the beautiful, strong, and innocent foretopman a mythic hero undergoing his rites of passage. We observe step by step how the innocent sailor, arbitrarily impressed from the *Rights-of-Man* to the *Bellipotent*, is received to his father's heart and gains his psychological and spiritual progress from a childishly ignorant Adam before the Fall to the holy idol of the Sailor Savior. The re-enactment of the Fall of Man and the Crucifixion and Ascension of the New-born God on the *Bellipotent* strike some very deep chords in human nature. This mythmaking process is admittedly one of the highest values of art. R. W. B. Lewis is justifiable to comment thus, “Melville's achievement was double: he brought myth into contemporary life, and he elevated that life into myth.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Franklin, pp. 201-02.

⁵¹ R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 147.

比利包德的神話

單 德 興

摘 要

本文旨在運用神話批評的理論，尤其是 Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, 和 Joseph Campbell 諸人的觀念，來研究梅爾維爾的遺作：比利包德 (*Billy Budd, Sailor*)。文中指出，梅爾維爾運用許多希臘及基督教的意象與典故，把小說中體健貌美、天真無邪的水手塑造成一位經歷成長儀式的神話英雄。我們看到這位從商船「人權號」上被強行徵召到軍艦「武揚號」上的水手，如何回歸父親的懷抱，而且獲致精神上的成長——由墮落前懵懂無知的亞當，到神聖的「水手救星」。梅爾維爾創造神話的天才因而再度得到肯定。