

ALL THE BOAT IS A STAGE: CLASSICAL TRAGEDY MEETS AMERICAN NARRATIVE – RE-READING MELVILLE’S *BILLY BUDD, SAILOR*

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RESUMO

Billy Budd, Sailor, obra derradeira de Herman Melville, situa-se, desde o subtítulo *An inside narrative*, num plano de interioridade. No interior de um navio de guerra ou no interior da alma humana, navegando pelos mares e pelas contradições, indecisões e instintos incompatíveis do homem. Através desta obra, Melville reescreve a tragédia atemporal e universal do Bem e do Mal, em eterno confronto, recuperando na América do séc. XIX o espírito também ele atemporal e universal da tragédia clássica. Melville reescreve na sua tragédia velhos mitos e arquétipos, com uma sensível objectividade. Da cultura clássica, Melville recupera as leis trágicas do destino, da honra, do comedimento e da obediência aos deuses. Em *Billy Budd*, reiventa simbolicamente as leis – não menos trágicas – da guerra e das instituições, e também da Natureza e dos mais puros sentimentos humanos.

ABSTRACT

With *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*, Herman Melville rewrites the eternal and universal tragedy of good and evil at fight, recovering, in the 19th century America, the likewise eternal and universal spirit of classical tragedy. *Billy Budd*’s plot is staged inside a HMS man-of-war and, simultaneously, inside human soul, sailing through the seas and through the contradictions and incompatible instincts of mankind. Melville founds his tragedy on a new myth, recycled from the Ancients. A myth expresses the rules of conduct of a certain social or religious group. Among the Greeks, the laws of destiny, honour, moderation and obedience to the Gods. In *Billy Budd*, not only the laws of war and institutions, but also the laws of nature and purest human feelings.

Billy Budd, Sailor, Herman Melville’s last novel, was left as a manuscript when the author died, on 28 September 1891, and remained unpublished until 1924. Considered one of Melville’s most symbolic works, *Billy Budd*’s plot is staged at sea but the overall pattern of action happens at an internal level (see the subtitle *An*

*inside narrative*¹), inside a HMS man-of-war or inside human soul, sailing through the seas and through the contradictions, indecisions and incompatible instincts of mankind. With this work, Melville rewrites the eternal and universal tragedy of the fight between good and evil, recovering, in the America of the nineteenth century, the similarly eternal and universal spirit of classical tragedy.

In this essay, we have adopted a comparative approach between Melville's work and several classical tragedies referring, whenever possible, to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and specially to its subchapters 'Tragic Fictional Modes' (which specifically refers Melville's *Billy Budd*) and 'The Mythos of Autumn: Tragedy'. Frye's belief is that literature forms an objective system, working by certain real laws which are the various modes, archetypes, myths, and genres that structure all literary works. Thus, literary works are made out of other literary works, as an enclosed recycling of texts. This thesis is mostly useful for the present theoretical reading of *Billy Budd*, as we are trying to apply the tragic archetype to Melville's work. However, we must disagree with Frye when he insists that literature is an autonomous verbal structure quite cut off from any reference beyond itself. *Billy Budd*'s action is enacted in this world and subject to its codes; the historical circumstances touch on the story at every moment. *Billy Budd* deserves a wider approach, like F.O. Matthiessen's, who leaves that verbal cocoon and points out the passionate humanity in Melville's own (re)creation of tragedy, which we are now trying to explore².

¹ Since 1924, several scholars working from the original manuscript have prepared editions representing their best efforts to provide a version of *Billy Budd* that represents Melville's final intentions. Earlier editions are: *Billy Budd, Foretopman*, ed. Raymond Weaver (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928) and *Billy Budd (An Inside Narrative)*, ed. Frederic Barron Freeman and revised by Elizabeth Treeman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948, 1956). This essay conforms to a more recent version: "Billy Budd, Sailor (An inside narrative)" in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, introd. Harold Beaver (London: Penguin Classics, 1967, 1970, 1985).

² According to Matthiessen, Melville reaffirms the heart in the America where *Billy Budd* was shaped 'against the conservative legalistic dryness that characterized our educated class, as fatal to real vitality' (Matthiessen, 1972: 514). In 'An Organic Hesitancy: Theme and Style in *Billy Budd*' (Pullin, 1978: 275-300), C.N. Manlove considers that the central theme in this story may be put as the relation of nature and civilization. This seems to be a rather reducing point of view, as its complexity refutes any attempt to trivialize the novel by one-dimensional analysis. In spite of the apparent straightforwardness of the facts of the case, there exists in the critical literature on *Billy Budd* a notable range of disagreement over its ultimate meaning. In

Billy Budd’s main character is the handsome sailor, who stands out from the others – “like Aldebaran among the lesser lights of his constellation” (321) – because of his beauty, liveliness and purity. Billy Budd possesses the excellence of heroes, the Greek ‘arete’. He is not only ‘agathos’ (good) but also ‘aristos’ (the best). As befits the role of protagonist in a tragedy, Billy is a superior character, like Antigone, Oedipus or Agamemnon, due to his personal characteristics and supposed nobility³. But this hero has a tragic flaw, as small as Achilles’s heel but with likewise deadly consequences, that places him somewhere between the divine and the all too human. Billy tends to stutter or to become frustratingly speechless when provoked or under psychological strain. An apparently harmless weakness, which nevertheless will dictate, in the climactic scene of confrontation with Claggart, the answer by gestures and not by words and, consequently, the death of both of them. Billy’s exceptional qualities leave him in a very exposed position: ‘And him only he elected. For whether it was because the other men when ranged before him showed to ill advantage after Billy’ (323). He is the sole one to be chosen for the Bellipotent, where human life is worth less than military rules of discipline, and immediately attracting Claggart’s hate. Only high characters have the right to play the lead role in tragedies and, for that reason, Gods (in classical tragedy) and men (in Melville’s rewriting) notice them more often, not only to favour them but also to punish these impending rivals with the ‘nemesis’. Tragedy is, according to Frye:

(...) the fiction of the fall of a leader (...) The particular thing called tragedy that happens to the tragic hero does not depend on his moral status. If it is causally related to something he has done, as it generally is, the tragedy is in the inevitability of the consequences of the act, not in its moral significance as an act. Hence the paradox that in tragedy pity and fear are raised and cast out. Aristotle’s hamartia or ‘flaw’, therefore, is not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness: it may be simply a matter of being a strong character in an exposed position, like Cordelia’ [and Billy Budd and White Jacket too] The exposed position is usually the place of leadership, in which a character is exceptional and isolated at the same time. (Frye, 1973: 37-38)

the course of the present essay, we will try to intervene in this on-going debate, pointing out some of *Billy Budd*’s multiple meanings but always keeping to the first mentioned purpose of exploring Melville’s rewriting of tragedy.

³ Since ‘tragedy represents better human beings than those we are’, according to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (XV).

Likewise, in *Billy Budd*, readers are reminded that ‘great trees are more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass’ (207). There is irony and ‘pathos’ in Billy’s impulsive, sincere gesture of jumping up in the cutter and bidding farewell to the old Rights-of-Man. The lieutenant gruffly orders him to sit down, demonstrating that Billy is indeed departing from a world of peace and rights and into a world of guns and arbitrary military discipline. In fact, the name Bellipotent has its origins in an archaic adjective meaning ‘mighty in war’, which is quite distant from the epithets of ‘jewel’ and ‘peacemaker’, given to the handsome sailor by Captain Gravelling. But he is also ‘a fighting peacemaker’, after the narrative of the fight with Red Whiskers, a tragic presage of the moment when Billy strikes Claggart: ‘Quick as lightning Billy let fly his arm. I dare say he never meant to do quite so much as he did, but anyhow he gave the burly fool a terrible drubbing. It took about half a minute I should think’ (325).

Aboard the Bellipotent, Billy ‘provoked an ambiguous smile in one or two harder faces among the bluejackets’ and a ‘peculiar favorable effect his person and demeanour had upon the more intelligent gentlemen of the quarter-deck’ (329). His beauty is described in classical terms, as an ancient hero, evoking an unknown lineage of nobility and perfection, thus reminding us of Oedipus and making Billy belong everywhere. During the many superlative pages that Melville devotes to the description of his hero⁴, Billy also appears as ‘a sort of upright barbarian’, the good savage from the Pacific islands who sings like the birds, a new Adam confined to a floating Garden with the new Serpent spying on him, ‘much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company’ (331). In this way, Melville alternates pagan-Greek with Christian mythology, passing from a classical tragedy to the Bible, both legitimating meta-narratives of two different and distant cultures, which provide a commonly accepted purpose for actions, knowledge or society at large, according to the notion developed by Jean-François Lyotard. The pan-mythological evocations of the ‘persona’ Billy Budd will grow gradually in the course of the narrative⁵.

⁴ ‘The first phase of tragedy is the one in which the central character is given the greatest possible dignity in contrast to the other characters...’ (Frye, 1973: 219).

⁵ Even Celtic mythology can be evoked: the most important Celtic God was Hu, the Celtic Apollo, also known as Beli and Budd.

In this long prologue, through the voice of the external narrator (in tragedy, the prologue usually belongs to a secondary character or to the protagonist himself or herself) we are also located in earlier historical times of war, during a lost golden age of heroes, where exceptional characters like Nelson and Captain Vere had their places, heroes who never sought for personal glory and died on their battle posts. The elevated style, with long, complex sentences, dense with information, suits that context perfectly.

'Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere' (see Latin 'verus', truth, and 'vir', man) possesses the 'arete' in war and in the ship's command. Here, he is the supreme judge ('dikastes') of good and evil, the vertex of the trinity he forms with Billy and Claggart. This is the last character to be introduced, before entering the stage. Melville takes a long time to model his characters, in front of the public's (or reader's) sight, before he breathes life and speech into them. The origins of Claggart are as mysterious as Billy's, an aura of mystery and repulsiveness surrounds him: 'though it was not exactly displeasing, nevertheless seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood' (342). He is the Serpent the Bellipotent carries inside itself, in an exiguous space of compulsory intimacy with all kind of 'lame ducks of morality who found in the navy a convenient and secure refuge' (344), forming a very unfavourable field of action for Billy's purity.

A chorus of sailors begins to take shape. Though without individual speeches, as a whole he spreads 'sea gossips', 'a rumor perdue', 'the sailors' dogwatch gossip' (343) about Claggart. The narrator tells us so, alternating those rumours with his own meditations. Throughout the story, this narrator-coryphaeus is sometimes going to allow the chorus of anonymous sailors to speak, in order to substantiate his own opinions. With the action about to start (section nine), the eight-sections one-voice prologue stops, clearing the way for the chorus's entry, in a 'parodos' of murmurs and suspicion. Melville rewrites tragedy, he doesn't transcribe it: therefore, *Billy Budd* is, as far as genre is concerned, a narrative, dependent on a narrator, instead of a drama. Hence, that narrator-coryphaeus dissociates himself from the narrative he controls from the outside, because he is not, as in classical tragedy, a mere character, a voice that stands out from the fictional chorus (of sailors, in this case). Within the narrative, a possible coryphaeus would be the old Dansker, a former member of the Agamemnon's crew, made wiser by

age, who interprets action obscurely. Thanks to him, Billy learns that he has become the object of Claggart's hate, when everything seems to indicate the contrary. He is the oracle, the augur of a tragic end, like Teiresias in *Antigone* and *Oedipus* or Cassandra in *Agamemnon*. 'Baby Budd', the epithet given to him by Dansker, decides to seek his advice, when the action has already begun. Billy states his case and ends with 'And now, Dansker, do tell me what you think of it' (349). The oracle answers enigmatically and the young Achilles tries in vain to extract 'something less unpleasingly oracular to the old sea Chiron' (349)⁶. The prophecy cannot be altered; the words Billy hears don't set his mind at ease, as Oedipus cannot avoid the curse by hurrying away from those he thinks are his parents. The 'fatum' the old wise man dictates seems to the innocent character as unfair as the brutal punishment of the other young sailor he has just witnessed, a presage of his own destiny. This episode arouses such terror and pity in Billy, that he decides never to deserve a single reproof: 'He resolved that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof' (346). It is an unconscious 'hybris' to Claggart's growing aversion for someone who is already the paradigm of natural perfection.

Melville opens section eleven with a series of rhetorical questions: 'What was the matter with the master-at-arms?' (351), what were the causes-consequences of the 'affair of the spilled soup'? Some previous unknown incident, maybe an enigma? No. Just 'an antipathy spontaneous and profound such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals by the mere aspect of some other mortal' (351). The 'anagnorisis' of the master-at-arms's hidden nature begins here, when he drops the mask ('persona') of honest normality. He has 'a depravity according to nature', because 'these men are madmen, and of the most dangerous sort, for their lunacy is not continuous, but occasional' (...) 'the method and the outward proceeding are always perfectly rational' (354). Claggart possesses a satanic madness (like Medea's), 'evil' (...) 'surcharged with energy' (356), he is the dark reverse of the fair handsome sailor. His monomania is similar to Ahab's, also directed against someone 'white' (Moby Dick / the fair and pure Billy) and from which something decisive must come. The combat between Billy and Claggart happens at the highest level because both are exceptional, one in good, the other in evil... 'But the

⁶ 'As always, your words are enigmatic and obscure' says Oedipus to Teiresias in Sophocles's play.

form of Billy Budd was heroic' (354). These extremes violate the Greek ideal of 'meden argen'. Equilibrium must be replaced, that is why the final 'catastrophe' exists, in order to reestablish peace, as far as it is possible inside a warship. Melville knows that his times cannot tolerate immaculate heroes. Billy is too pure to survive. And true tragedy lies here: the cruel 'fatum' falls on an innocent character, victim of someone else's madness (like *Agamemnon*'s Ephigenia).

If there is a reason for choosing him for catastrophe it is an inadequate reason, and raises more objections than it answers.' (...) 'We may call this typical victim the *pharmakos* or scapegoat. We meet a *pharmakos* figure in' (...) 'Melville's Billy Budd' (...) 'He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. (Frye, 1973: 41)

'Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatal stage whereon to play its part.' (...) 'In the present instance the stage is a scrubbed gun deck' (356): while rewriting tragedy, Melville transfers the scenery from the facades of the palaces of Thebes to the HMS Bellipotent, following nevertheless the rule of unity of space⁷. And it is at the precise moment the ship is most isolated in the immense ocean, after leaving the fleet behind, that the action really begins. The sea element works as a surrounding space to the minuscule troubled human island, since this is *An inside narrative*, in the very same way that the endless universe surrounds the restless home of mankind. Melville turns the ship into a microcosmic image of the world, as he had already done with the San Dominick of *Benito Cereno* and with *Moby Dick*'s Pequod. Even more obvious is *The world's a ship on its passage out*, the sub-title of *White Jacket*, which sets forth Melville's deliberate intention to picture the world in a man-of-war, to examine the nature of life in such a microcosm.

Melville devotes section fourteen to the 'peripeteia' that completes Claggart's plan. Billy commits the 'hamartia' when he decides not to reveal, against every martial law, the mysterious dark-of-night attempt by the afterguardsman to ensnare him in an implied mutiny. This is a decision similar to Antigone's, when she chooses to pay the forbidden funeral homages. The traitorous sailor plays the role of an emissary from evil, a demonic figure half-invisible, but

⁷ We may consider that Melville also follows the rule of 'unity of action', although he does so only in the story of Billy Budd itself. As far as time is concerned, though it takes more than twenty-four hours, the core of the tragedy takes place in less than one day (confrontation with Claggart, trial, sentence, hanging), according to the classical rule of 'unity of time'.

Billy shares the tragic blindness of Oedipus to the signs he keeps receiving: 'As it was, innocence was his blinder' (366). Even though the Delphic Dansker has foreseen the disaster, he neither interferes in action nor gives advice. Billy's innocence isolates him, steals his insight, 'had some of the weaknesses inseparable from essential good nature' (359) and offers him up to sacrifice. Classical comparisons are deliberate, recalling the Greek 'ananke' or 'moira', the unavoidable fatality and immutable destiny. The brief dialogue with the afterguardsman is also part, together with the oracle's consultation in section nine, of the spoken episode where action proceeds, among the long 'stasima' of the narrator-coryphaeus.

The long sections eighteen and nineteen comprehend the height of the action, the central 'peripeteia' after which nothing will be the same again. The three main characters take their places on stage⁸ for the unexpected catastrophe. We feel the 'epistasis' (suspense) looming around the events now about to be narrated. The initial accusation is full of allusions, by the narrator and by Captain Vere himself, to Claggart's possible falsehood: 'Do you come to me, Master-at-Arms, with so foggy a tale?'; 'there's a yardarm-end for the false witness'; 'strong suspicious clogged by strange dubieties' (373). When Billy goes to Vere's cabin, he does so in full confidence, even expecting a promotion, because he believes that the captain looks kindly upon him. However 'to an immature nature essentially honest and humane, forewarning intimidation of subtler danger from one's kind come tardily if at all' (375). Ironically, Billy is half-right, since the Captain feels deep affection for him and a strong suspicion towards Claggart. The 'anagnorisis' ('a phenomenal change') of the master-at-arms's true identity proceeds, through violent changes in his physiognomy: 'the accuser's eyes' (...) 'their wonted rich violet color blurring into a muddy purple' (375). Everything seems ready for a fair ending.

But fate intervenes: Billy is the 'Fated boy'. Remember: 'Many a fate doth Zeus dispense, high on his Olympian throne; oft do the gods bring things to pass beyond man's expectation; that which we thought would be, is not fulfilled, while for the unlooked-for god finds out a way; and such hath been the issue of this matter', sings the final chorus of *Medea*. At the moment of catastrophe, a single gesture alters the lives of the triad of players and dictates the death of two of

⁸ In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace clearly prescribes that a fourth character should never speak.

them. Mesmerized by Claggart's reptilian look and captive of his hidden defect, Billy suffers 'a strange dumb gesturing and gurgling', 'horror', 'a convulsed tongue-tie', 'an agony of ineffectual eagerness' (376). It is the Homeric 'ate', the disastrous momentary madness of the hero. He seems to be 'in the first struggle against suffocation', like 'a condemned vestal priestess, bringing to his face an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold' (376). Besides the obvious presage of death by hanging, the comparative elements have religious and sacrificial connotations (the priestess, the Cross). Billy's handicap, contrasting with the rhetorical skills Claggart had just evinced, may be imposed by adverse fate, so that he can counterbalance it with the deadly gesture and fulfill his destiny. But it can also be the best image of human weakness, of the incapacity to alter the will of the pagan and Christian gods (Zeus/God), who coexist freely in this Christian rewriting of a pagan genre.

Claggart's death is narrated in a few lines: 'The next instant, quick as the flame from the discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck' (376). The law of 'dike' was accomplished with fulminating quickness, unlike the long catastrophic dialogues between Oedipus and Jocasta or Antigone and Creon, and Claggart's body lies like a dead snake. The hand that punished the devilish Claggart was the right hand of an angel of God, who put the divine judgement into practice: 'Struck dead by an angel of God'; 'It is the divine judgement on Ananias!' (378). The Gods interfered, destroyed the devil, but they don't spare the one they used as an instrument either and 'yet the angel must hang!' (378). The supreme excellence granted to Billy, a perfect human being and an agent of the Gods, requires a sacrifice: a human sacrifice on the pagan level, the sacrifice of the lamb in a Christian point of view, with Captain Vere explicitly using the biblical metaphor. Now is the time for God the Father to abandon Christ the Redeemer at the mercy of his executioners. Likewise, in the immediate human level, Captain Vere, until this moment a fatherly character, reveals his military disciplinarian side. Even though Vere loves Billy like a son, he realizes the necessity of making an example of him to preserve the King's law. Caught between compassion and duty, he is a tragic figure irrevocably impelled toward duty.

Vere immediately summons a drumhead court, a decision which, bearing in mind the several critics who studied its obvious illegality,

shows a serious ignorance of British naval regulations⁹. By Captain Vere and/or by Melville. This is, simultaneously, another unhappy circumstance, sealing Billy's destiny, and a poetic licence giving the tragedy more 'pathos'. 'The unhappy event which has been narrated could not have happened at a worse juncture was but too true' (380); 'You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Ay. They know the well-founded alarm-the panic is struck throughout England' (389): indeed, the action occurs during Britain's war with France, shortly after the Great Mutiny in the British navy at Spithead and the Nore. This fact complicates Billy's crime and condemns him to serve as an example of wartime discipline.

The long episode gives way to a brief 'stasima' about Vere's possible madness, provoked by witnessing such a violent scene (like Medea's murderous madness and Oedipus's self-punishing madness, both consequences of a catastrophe). It also comments on the burden of power and on the duty of judging that great characters (Vere, Creon, Agamemnon) must face. Especially because good and evil have just changed places, inverting the roles of victim and culprit, now Claggart and Billy respectively. Thus, the tragedy of destiny meets, as usual, the tragedy of guilt and punishment, as in *Agamemnon*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus* and *Coephoroe*. The narrator repeatedly states the tragic nature of the dilemma and moral responsibility of punishing the accused but these scruples are absent in Creon and the judges of the Areopagus.

In the closed space of the deck cabin, without any possible escape, the episode hastens to happen, marked by the need for quick action, as we read: 'sense of the urgency', 'a drumhead court was summarily convened', 'all being quickly and readiness', 'concisely' (381-382). 'Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him' (383): Billy himself is aware of the fact that silence was fatal for him, in spite of being the result of his only flaw, for which he is not responsible. But, in fact, he repeats that same silence, now deliberately, when he omits, once more, the episode of the night interview. Billy's natural simplicity doesn't fit the complexity of

⁹ See the accurate conclusion of Barbara Johnson, in 'Melville's Fist: the Execution of Billy Budd': 'As a political allegory, Melville's *Billy Budd* is thus much more than a study of good and evil, justice and injustice. It is a dramatization of the twisted relations between knowing and doing, speaking and killing, reading and judging, which make political understanding and action so problematic' (Bloom, 1987: 47-80).

human laws. 'It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to nature? No, to the king' (387), Vere stresses, preparing the sentence: 'In receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents' (387). The king appears as the reverse of nature, human law is opposed to natural law, the first condemns whereas the second forgives. Both are universal and eternally conflicting dimensions, since man has become a social being. Just like Antigone, condemned by Creon in the name of 'nomos' (law), because she exercised the eternal and unchangeable principles of 'philia' (friendship and family ties) and 'eusebeia' (pity).

Three men compose the jury in this improvised court, less convinced than agitated by Captain Vere's speech, three unwilling Fates of the destiny of a man everybody loves. Vere bases his argument on dichotomies: hearts vs. heads; warm vs. cool; feminine vs. man; private conscience vs. imperial conscience. Pity is dangerous: 'They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them-afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles' (390). In *Antigone*, when the chorus asks Creon if the heroine's death is already decided, the immediate answer is: 'For you and for me. There can be no delay'. In *Billy Budd*, the words could almost be the same: 'For you [law] and for me [judge]. There can be no delay'. But the great difference lies in the suffering the decision causes within Vere. The narrator-coryphaeus intervenes for a short pause, glossing, together with Vere, the dilemma of judging in times of war and before briefly summarizing the expected sentence: 'Billy Budd was formally convicted and sentenced to be hung at the yardarm in the early morning watch, it being now night' (391).

In the two following sections, Melville alters the rhythm to dynamic brevity, 'stasima' where, paradoxically, the action moves forward. While the Bellipotent's crew, all surprise and compassion spent, carries out the necessary formalities with efficiency, Vere informs Billy, in private, of his sentence. Here, the author seems to follow the classical canon that protects the eyes of the public from a scene of such intense drama. A rumor, a confused murmur emerged from the inside chorus of sailors, but soon 'it was pierced and suppressed by shrill whistles of the boatswain and his mates' (394). The tragedy seems to lead us to the epiphany of law and order, by all means, reviving the Greek principles of 'sophrosyne' (moderation)

and 'eunomia' (good order). The interview between Budd and Vere joined together, in perfect harmony, two human beings who complete each other in 'arete', both natural and institutional. But this is a utopian completion in this world / ship, one of them must disappear.

Billy's agony and death (sections twenty-four and twenty-five) contain obvious allusions to Christian mythology and its heroes, as if Melville had meant to reveal his intention of using that modern mythical basis in the new tragedy. In a scene of symbolic chromatic contrasts, Billy lies, in chains, awaiting his end. Wearing 'a white jumper and white duck trousers, like a patch of discolored snow in early April', Billy's purity stands out in the 'cave's black mouth', between two black cannons, 'like livery of the undertakers' (395). Ironic: the immaculate peacemaker waits for death between two machines of war, because he has killed the incarnation of evil. A faint light halos the central character of this dramatic picture, similar to Fra Angelico's seraphs. The heart of darkness lives in the entrails of the ship, a synecdoche of the world that forces him to die. The truly imperishable evil is no longer Claggart (who was mortal and visible in his perversity), but the law of man, invisible and indestructible (though destructive), that undermines even a character of such moral strength as Vere. 'The overwhelming majority of tragedies do leave us with a sense of the supremacy of impersonal power and of the limitation of human effort' (Frye, 1973: 209). And its victim is someone dressed purely in white, that adolescent, 'akin to the look of a slumbering child in the cradle' (396). According to Northrop Frye, the central figures of 'pathos' are often children or adolescents (Antigone, Ismene, Ephigenia), naive and innocent, with a certain inarticulateness and difficulty in expressing themselves and moving the others (like Billy's stutter)¹⁰.

The Chaplain's theological theories about salvation and eternal life don't produce any effect on Billy. His tranquility is above any religion; the soul is just another organ of the body, as in the Homeric man, that is going to disappear within a few hours. Thus, death appears to him as something natural, without fear, 'a fear more prevalent in highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand nearer to unadulterate Nature' (397). We will never hear the 'komos' (religious lamentation)

¹⁰ Antigone and Ismene are also called 'children' by Creon, though the first was already sentenced to death and the second had just been threatened with the same tragic destiny.

from Billy’s mouth. And ‘a barbarian Billy radically was’ (397), a superior savage, like Queequeg, Marnoo or Fayaway, innately saved because he doesn’t know condemnation. Although Melville describes the character with obvious Christian references, Billy ignores those implications. And the author doesn’t restrain himself from speaking ironically about ‘the minister of Christ though receiving his stipend from Mars’ and ‘the minister of Peace serving in the host of the God of war-Mars’ (397-398): God and Gods are together, for the sake of Melville’s rhetoric.

Billy’s destiny is sealed with the public execution, with his announced death, like the deaths of Antigone, Ephigenia, Clytmnestra and Aegisthus, but against Horace’s precept ‘avoid showing on stage actions that should take place inside. Medea mustn’t murder her children within sight of the public’. His last words ‘God bless Captain Vere!’ echo unexpectedly in the silence of the crew, arranged as in a cathedral, around the cruciform mast where Billy is going to die. He blesses the one who has condemned him, just like Christ on the Cross prayed ‘Father, forgive them...’. The moment of the crucifixion / ascension / hanging coincides with the prophetic glory of sunrise. ‘The death of a god appropriately involves what Shakespeare, in *Venus and Adonis*, calls the ‘solemn sympathy’ of nature, the word solemn having here some of its etymological connections with ritual’ (Frye, 1973: 36).

In that moment, Billy conciliates all the underlying mythologies of the text. The fair ‘Lamb of God seen in mystical vision’ (400) was sacrificed, while the blessing of the chorus seems to celebrate the ritual, and the rising sun the Christian resurrection. But he is also the barbarian in whose death the sun-God of ancient nature-worship cults has to be present. And, being part of a rewriting of classical tragedy, Billy is also subject to the designs of the Olympian Gods, as Ephigenia, similarly sacrificed in / by war, under Artemis’s orders.

When, some days afterwards, the sailors question themselves about the phenomenal character of Billy’s death, we immediately recall the miracle of resurrection on the third day. But Billy only returns as an involuntary echoing of his benediction, at the moment of returning to the sea, to the origin of life, where nature (through the seafowls) welcomes him as one of hers. Human science, personified in the ship’s surgeon, avoids imaginative and metaphysical explanations about his death, because he can’t understand it, just like

society will ironically pervert the whole episode on the pages of the 'News from the Mediterranean'.

The last of the three characters to meet his destiny is Captain Vere, who dies uttering a kind of antiphony, or choral response, to Billy's original benediction. Now, everything is ready for the 'exodus' of the chorus and final of the tragedy. The narrator-coryphaeus leaves first, making sure that the audience fully understood the moral of the story (see the final chorus of *Oedipus*: 'Therefore wait to see life's ending ere thou count one mortal blest; wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest'). He reaffirms Billy's purity, 'that face never deformed by a sneer or subtler vile freak of the heart within' (408), the instinctive perception all sailors had of his innocence and incapacity to mutiny, defeated only by the implacable military laws. In the same manner that classical tragedy based itself on historical(?) facts, like the Trojan war and its consequences, Melville insists that the story has narrated a real event (see the several references to dates and battles, like Trafalgar in 1805). But the identification with tragedy is stronger if we connect Melville's realism with his intention to make a cathartic criticism of certain realities of the so-called civilization, its rules and usages¹¹. In the same manner, tragedy also focused on the causes of human decline and on the severe criticism against the excesses and injustices of its time, with a purpose of social utility, purifying spectators ('catharsis') from their immoral or anti-social tendencies.

During the exodus of the chorus of sailors, there is a real choral ode, the ballad 'Billy in the Darbies', composed by an unknown sailor and soon adopted by everyone. Billy has become an immortal idol, celebrated like a hero in the sailors' poetry, while a small piece of the mast where he died is revered like a piece of the Cross. Billy, hanged as a criminal, is immortalized as a saint, independently from any rehabilitation by the all-mighty (and highly criticised) institutions.

Therefore, Melville founds his tragedy on a new myth, recycled from the ancients, with a sensitive objectivity and no need for terrible speeches. A myth expresses the rules of conduct of a certain social or religious group: among the ancient Greeks, the laws of destiny, honour, moderation and obedience to the Gods; in *Billy Budd*, not only the laws of war and institutions, but also the laws of nature and purest human feelings.

¹¹ The same happened in *White Jacket* (1850), with the effective denunciation of the punitive practices aboard warships. The novel led to an act of Congress banning the practice of flogging in the US Navy.

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