Melville's Thematics of Form

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Art
In placid hours well-pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;
And patience—joyous energies;
Humility—yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity—reverence. These must mate,
And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel—Art.

HERMAN MELVILLE
The end of Melville’s public career as a writer of fiction is marked by *The Confidence-Man*, but he left at his death an apparently unfinished manuscript which remained unpublished until 1924.¹ As Melville’s last masterpiece, separated by thirty years from his other fiction, the story invites an autobiographical interpretation. And, indeed, it has become the subject of an intensive critical quarrel. Regarded on the one hand as Melville’s final acceptance of the facts of reality and on the other as his most ironic portrayal of a terrestrial world where celestial ideals cannot exist,² *Billy Budd* is made to seem almost as ambiguous as *The Confidence-Man*.

Although the story contains within itself sufficient clues for a meaningful explication of its methods and themes, the fact that it has become the subject of such controversy and the circumstances surrounding its creation demand that it be viewed, if possible, in the context of Melville’s other fiction. Since *The Confidence-Man* seems to invalidate the possibility of meaningful fiction and marks the end of the short but productive period of Melville’s public career, the very fact of *Billy Budd*’s existence appears to suggest that he modified the theory of fiction dramatized in the earlier novel.

*Billy Budd*, however, represents no new departure for Melville, for it looks back not to *The Confidence-Man* but two years beyond it to the novelette “Benito Cereno.” Published in 1855, this story is a product of the period in which Melville was seriously questioning the role of fiction in a world of lies, but it precedes the comic and ironic dismissal of the literary art found in *The Confidence-Man*. Because its narrator shares important methodological and thematic concerns with the narrator of *Billy Budd*, the earlier story not only provides an insight into the more ambiguous later one but also points to its place in the body of Melville’s fiction.

“Benito Cereno,” written two years before *The Confidence-Man*, shares its concern with the problems of the relationship

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¹ For an account of the growth of the *Billy Budd* manuscript as well as a history of the text, see the Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Seals, Jr., edition of *Billy Budd* (BB, 1–24).

² The argument is summarized by Hayford and Seals (BB, 24–39).
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between fiction and reality, although this theme is less explicitly dramatized in the shorter piece. While it is true that the story is filled with words which describe the actions of confidence men, they are confined, for the most part, to descriptions of Delano's mistaken vision. Cereno seems to him to act by "design," to be engaged in some kind of "pretense" (90), to be guilty of either "innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture" (76)—in short, to be a practicer of the "craft of some tricksters" (77). Delano is, however, mistaken about Cereno; although he is engaged in a masquerade, it is one into which he has been forced by the apparently innocent Negroes. Moreover, as was not the case in The Confidence-Man, reality seems as last to break through the disguises of appearances, and Delano's "be-nighted mind" is, at the end of his experience, apparently illuminated by a flash of revelation when he discovers that the masquerade has been directed by the Negroes.

The development of the story is, in fact, centered around Delano's gradual movement toward illumination. A carefully unified spatial and temporal structure, the story proper begins at sunrise with Delano's sighting of the "San Dominick" and ends at night on the same day with Delano's revelation, Cereno's rescue, and the subsequent capture of the Negroes. Reality seems to triumph over appearances as the Negroes are at last seen "with mask torn away" (119), and the meaning of the ambiguous words "Follow your leader" seems finally revealed when the canvas mask which had covered the hull is "whipped away" (119) revealing the skeleton of Aranda.

The end of the carefully structured account of Delano's deception and illumination is not, however, the end of "Benito Cereno." In addition to the main narrative there are two other sections: a series of extracts taken from "official Spanish documents" which record the investigation of a court of inquiry of the "whole affair" (123); and a short flashback, "retrospectively, or irregularly given" (138), which describes conversations between Delano and Cereno following the rescue of the latter. That these two fragments, in addition to shedding "light
on the preceding narrative” (123), also serve to undercut the
unities of time, place, and action is clear enough. Less clear
but very important is the light which the inclusion of these
fragments casts on the narrator’s motives and methods. A clue
is provided by an important passage written three years earlier
in Pierre:

while the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin veils
of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last; and while
the countless tribe of common dramas do but repeat the same; yet
the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illus­
trate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never
unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; but in
imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated
stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of
time and fate. (VII, 166)

The main narrative of “Benito Cereno” seems to operate in
much the same way as those “common novels” which the nar­
rator of Pierre describes. The mysteries introduced in the be ­
inning at sunrise appear to be cleared up as darkness falls
near the end: the Negroes are captured, and the “San Dominick”
is towed back into the harbor. The intricacies of “Benito
Cereno,” however, are not unraveled this easily. The narrator’s
ironic query as to whether or not Delano’s “undistrustful good
nature” implies, “along with a benevolent heart, more than
ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception”
(55) suggests that the American captain is not a man gifted
with profound insight. But in the narrative proper the reader
is limited to Delano’s point of view; he is made to experience
the events on board the “San Dominick” through the eyes of
the “undistrustful” captain. For this reason it is only in the
last two sections of the story, when Cereno’s account of his
experiences is described in the official language of the court of
inquiry and Delano and Cereno are seen through the eyes of
the narrator, that the reader comes to see the “deeper shadows”
(55) of “Benito Cereno.”
While the simpleminded Delano believes that he finally understands his experience aboard the “San Dominick,” the narrator and reader look for more light to be shed on the “juggling play” (104) in which Benito and Babo are the central characters. Like Delano, the reader wonders “what was the truth” (82), but unlike the good captain he does not feel that the simple act of unmasking has revealed it. As with *The Confidence-Man*, the real problem lies not so much in deciding who wears the mask as in discovering the implications of the masquerade. For this reason, the reader comes to the extracts hoping, like the narrator, that they will “shed light on the preceding narrative, as well as, in the first place, reveal the true port of departure and true history of the San Dominick’s voyage” (123). The documents, however, prove to be “disappointing sequels,” for while they give the factual history of the ship’s voyage, they raise more questions than they answer. The factual account is as much a masquerade as were the actions of the subtle Babo. Although the narrator hopes that the documents may serve “as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede” (138), and thereby unlock the “San Dominick”’s hull, they prove as misleading as the key which is “suspended by a slender silken cord, from Don Benito’s neck” (75).

While the extracts clear up such matters as the reason for Atufal’s chains (126), the attack on the Spanish boy by the Negroes (136), and the whispered conversations between Cereno and Babo (132); identify the sparkling object which Delano sees in the hand of one of the sailors (136); and describe in detail the barbaric cruelty of the Negroes as well as the later revenge of the sailors on the Negro captives, they make no attempt to deal with the questions of meaning and motive. In fact, the naïveté and shallowness implicit in the language of the documents underscores the irony present in the fact that the Negroes, who are regarded as cargo along with “thirty cases of hardware” (124), reverse the relationship between master and slave. Similarly, by reporting, in a
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matter-of-fact and unemotional language, that the Negresses—one of whom Delano had regarded as an image of “naked nature,” “pure tenderness and love” (87)—were not only “satisfied at the death of their master, Don Alexandro” but that “had the negroes not restrained them, they would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards” (135), the documents raise important questions concerning the relationship between the Negroes and the Spaniards. These questions are only complicated by the further revelation of the behavior of the sailors toward the Negroes after they have been captured and shackled to the ring bolts of the deck.

The documents, then, instead of shedding light on the preceding narrative, cast over it additional shadows. Problems which remained beneath the surface while the events were seen through Delano’s naïve eyes merely become more obvious when the events are described in the absurdly selective language of the court of inquiry. Only when the reader reaches the “retrospectively, or irregularly given” account (138) of the conversations between Cereno and Delano does he begin to see the full extent of the intricacies and shadows of Cereno’s experience. Here for the first time attention is focused on the Spaniard’s response to the mutiny, an issue which the preceding sections had approached only by recording the fact that he had retired to a monastery. The sensitive Cereno is unable to explain away the “malign machinations and deceptions” to which he has been exposed by accepting Delano’s view that “all is owing to Providence” (139). He senses that a “shadow” has been cast over him by the Negro and feels himself blown by the winds of his experience toward his “tomb” (139).

Something of the nature of this destructive “shadow” is revealed in the narrator’s description of one aspect of Cereno’s experience which the Captain finds too horrible to discuss at all:

But if the Spaniard’s melancholy sometimes ended in muteness upon topics like the above [the Negro], there were others upon which he never spoke at all; on which, indeed, all his old reserves were
piled. Pass over the worst, and, only to elucidate, let an item or two of these be cited. The dress, so precise and costly, worn by him on the day whose events have been narrated, had not willingly been put on. And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty. (140)

As unwilling as Cereno to discuss the meaning of the masquerade of which he has been a part is Babo, who from the time of his capture to his "voiceless end," "uttered no sound" (140). It is this mutual silence, ambiguously maintaining the connection between master and slave, which points to the central concerns of "Benito Cereno." Both the Spaniard and the Negro are inextricably bound together because they have been the primary participants in a subversive masquerade which has transformed cosmos into chaos. Cereno's being forced to dress and act the part of captain while in the position of slave undermines the authenticity of a bureaucratic world where all of man's roles have an extra-human foundation.

The world represented by the "San Dominick" is a feudal one, composed of a number of planes arranged in order of dignity and connected by a net of master-servant relationships. This is a "follow your leader" world (58), a place where it is "with captains as with gods" (64), for in the captain is "lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal" (63). And surely one effect of Cereno's association with Charles V is to connect the parallel planes of ship and nation. That the order and stability implied by this hierarchical system are illusory is suggested by the narrator's description of both the ship and its captain. Although in its time "a very fine vessel," the "San Dominick" now seems like one of the "superannuated Italian palaces" which, "under a decline of masters, preserved signs of former state" (57). The apparel of the god-like captain Cereno suggests the "image of an invalid

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courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague" (69). To Delano he seems either "one of those paper captains . . . who has little of command but the name" (71) or a "low-born adventurer, masquerading as an oceanic grandee; . . . one playing a part above his real level" (77). Indeed, the "San Dominick" is filled with so many "strange costumes, gestures, and faces" that it seems "unreal," a "shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave" (59).

"Benito Cereno," however, is not a story which celebrates the replacing of Cereno's feudal world with the republican one of Delano, for Delano also regards Providence as the ground for universal order. His Protestant, democratic scheme merely eliminates most of the bureaucratic machinery and thereby reduces the "theatrical aspect" of life's "juggling play" (104). When the chief mate of the "Bachelor's Delight" directs the attack on the "San Dominick," he reveals the essential similarity between the worlds of the two ships by directing his men to "Follow your leader!" (122).

It is Delano's shallow vision rather than the superiority of the system he represents which protects him from the shadow of Cereno's experience. Lacking the Spaniard's insight, he regards the Negroes' revolt as a momentary disruption of natural order: " 'But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.' 'Because they have no memory,' he dejectedly replied; 'because they are not human' " (139). It is because he has a memory that Cereno is unable to forget the withered leaves of his past experience and to accept the bright blueness of the sea and sky as any more than another mask. The shadow cast by the Negro has not merely darkened his world but has robbed it of its supporting substance and left him surrounded with "artificially stiffened" but empty forms. For Cereno the sun, sea, and sky remain as they were when the "San Dominick" first entered the harbor of St. Maria:
The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come. (55)

This is a world composed entirely of surfaces, with all of its parts mixed and confused. Shadows here do not lead to essential forms but to "deeper shadows." Sky and sea are almost indistinguishable and both seem equally artificial. The sea, product of a smelter's mould, is "laid out and leaded up," "soul gone, defunct" (93); and the "surtout" sky is the first of a series of sinister, artificial coverings. Like the "San Dominick," which seems a "shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep," nature also is composed of an enigmatic set of shadows and surfaces which apparently conceal some terrifying secret.

But what is the nature of the reality which lies hidden beneath the artificial surfaces of nature and the costumes and roles of Cereno and the Negroes? To the reader familiar with Melville's other fiction, a partial answer to this question is suggested by the narrator's description of the "San Dominick" as a "white-washed monastery" (57). As is the case with the "white-washed" "Fidèle," this ship, "launched, from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones" (57), with a skeleton for a figurehead, is an image of the blank background against which life's unreal play is performed. And also, like the "Fidèle," the Spanish vessel is the stage for a masquerade which is ontologically subversive. Not only is the ship described as a "white-washed monastery," but Delano first thinks that he sees a "ship-load of monks" because the Negroes resemble "Black Friars pacing the cloisters" (57). Cereno's cabin is filled with objects related to monasticism, and he resembles a "hypochondriac abbot" (62), while Babo seems a "begging friar of St. Francis" (68). More-
over, when Cereno is rescued from the “San Dominick,” he merely moves from a metaphoric monastery to a real one. He even maintains the services of Babo through his symbolic equal, “the monk Infeliz” (137), who becomes his “special guardian and consoler, by night and by day” (123). For Benito Cereno the shadow of the Negro falls not only over the decks of the ship but over all existence, and for this reason, as he returns from sea to land, he finds only another and larger “San Dominick.” That this is the meaning of his monastic retirement is implied by the fact that although Babo’s “slight frame, inadequate to that which it held,” is “burned to ashes,” his head, “that hive of subtlety,” is “fixed on a pole in the Plaza” and looks toward the church where the bones of Aranda are entombed and toward the monastery where Cereno finally dies (140). The slave-owning businessman Aranda and Captain Cereno, representatives of the world of established social forms, are introduced by Babo to the fictitiousness of their world and are brought face to face with the ambiguous but ineluctable facts of a shadow world full of hate and violence where slave is master and master slave, a world of death in life.

The social realm is not, however, the only part of the world of appearances which is invalidated by Babo. Just as his masquerade as a servant while in the position of master undermines the whole structure of a social order based on this apparently essential relationship, so his and other Negroes’ ability to seem “nothing less than a ship-load of monks” inverts and invalidates a higher order which is also based on the tie between master and servant. While playing the role of monkish servant Babo assumes the powers of God the master as he forces the Spaniards to “keep faith with the blacks” (129). That he in fact possesses the ability to punish those who do not keep his commandments is evidence enough to call into doubt Delano’s traditional but naïve view that “all is owing to Providence” (139).

By casting a shadow over the basic master-slave relationship, Babo destroys the ground for order in the social, politi-
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cal, and religious realms. He reveals the true meaning of the symbolic figures on the “San Dominick”’s "shield-like stern-piece" (58). The carving of the "dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (58) is a synecdoche for the entire story; like Cereno’s masquerade it is a subversive parody of the “follow your leader” world. This “relic of faded grandeur” is a “mythological device” which seems to testify that man’s roles have divine authorization. Babo, however, discovers that the two figures are easily reversible and thereby puts in question the possibility of any kind of legitimate sanction for either. Near the end of the masquerade the meaning of the two masked figures is extended when the “prostrate negro,” ground under Delano’s foot, is discovered “snakishly writhing up from the boat’s bottom,” with a dagger aimed “at the heart of his master” (118).

Babo’s masquerade, then, is not discredited by a discrepant reality, for the “facts” which are in conflict with it are no less unreal. The master-servant relationship is not an essential one but is another shadow concealing a skeletal reality which is best described by the images of death that permeate the story. Complete with funeral march “supplied by the chanting oakum pickers” (59) and carrying the “cadaverous” Cereno (70) as well as a skeleton figurehead, the ship, with its “sarcophagus lid” (98) doors, is a huge coffin. After having glimpsed this frightening world of darkness and death, Cereno is no longer able to return to that other brighter but illusory world of forms. So it is that after three months in the monastery, no longer cadaverous but a corpse indeed, his body is “borne on the bier” (140), an obvious replacement for the “hearse-like” ship (58).

If the theme of “Benito Cereno” is in part the fictitiousness of social, political, and religious forms, its method is a demonstration of the illusory nature of the architectonic fiction. As the limited point of view of the first part of the story suggests, the intricacies of human life can never be revealed by the care-
fully rounded and self-contained fiction. "Truth [has] its ragged edges" (BB, XXVIII, 128); and as the two sections of the story which are "retrospectively, or irregularly given" suggest through the shadows which they cast over the preceding narrative, the subversive nature of truth forces all meaningful fictions to end in "disappointing sequels."

That the methods and themes of Billy Budd closely parallel those of "Benito Cereno" is clearly suggested by the narrator's introduction to the three short "sequels" which follow the account of Billy's life and death aboard the "Bellipotent." In way of an apology for his inclusion of the description of Vere's death, the account of Billy's crime by a naval chronicle, and the ballad "Billy in the Darbies," the narrator generalizes on the nature of form in fiction.

The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.

How it fared with the Handsome Sailor during the year of the Great Mutiny has been faithfully given. But though properly the story ends with his life, something in way of sequel will not be amiss. Three brief chapters will suffice. (128)

In addition to suggesting that Billy Budd, like "Benito Cereno," will end in "disappointing sequels," this passage serves as a warning to the reader to pay close attention to the material which follows; for as the method of "Benito Cereno" demonstrates and as the narrator affirms here, truth is revealed only when formal order is destroyed. The obvious implications of the narrator's words, then, is that the meaning of Billy Budd is likely to be found by explicating the relationship which the sequels have to the story proper.

As the large amount of Billy Budd criticism makes clear,
the central ambiguity and therefore the central problem of the story grows out of what seems to be the narrator's equivocal attitude toward Captain Vere. Since the narrative leaves little doubt of either Billy's prelapsarian and Christ-like innocence or of Claggart's devilish depravity, it is Vere's methods of dealing with the confrontation between these two cosmic characters which provides the central drama of the story. As the critical quarrel over Vere's motives testifies, however, the meaning of the drama is not easily understood. Is Vere the object of the narrator's pointed irony or the tragic hero of the story? This is the central problem of *Billy Budd*.

But if the narrative proper leaves the reader in doubt as to the narrator's attitude toward Vere, the sequels provide a number of fairly clear and important clues. Of crucial significance is the fact that the narrator's apology for his three "ragged edges" directly follows, and is a commentary on, a concise statement of Vere's metaphysical position: "'With mankind,' he would say, 'forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood.' And this he once applied to the disruption of forms going on across the Channel and the consequences thereof" (XXVII, 128). It is clear from the narrator's own comments, which associate form with the illusions of "pure fiction" that this is at least one area in which he disagrees with Vere. Captain Vere, however, like Benito Cereno, is dedicated to the preservation of an ordered world. A member of the "aristocracy" (VII, 62) and a ruler of men, he is a man whose "settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise" (62). As Vere's allusion to the French Revolution "going on across the Channel" suggests, he recognizes that with a breakdown in forms comes social

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4 Interesting in this connection is the observation of Hayford and Seals that the "cumulative effect" of Melville's final revisions in the *Billy Budd* manuscript was "to throw into doubt not only the rightness of Vere's decision and the soundness of his mind but also the narrator's own position regarding him" (*BB*, 34).
and political chaos and, as the later mention of the Revolutionary ship, the "Athée," implies, religious chaos as well. And, as his use of the Orpheus myth makes clear, he regards man's artistic endeavors as an important part of the "measured forms" with which he keeps out chaos.

The narrator, however, is interested in truth, not the maintenance of illusion. Unlike Orpheus, who seems a kind of confidence man,\(^6\) he seeks to spellbind no one. Instead of leaving the reader with the apotheosis of Billy and the formal order of Vere's martial world, he chooses to add "something in the way of sequel." By this act he throws a shadow of ambiguity over what would otherwise be a tragic account of the failure of celestial innocence to survive in a terrestrial and martial world. While the narrative proper portrays a fallen world which is incapable of dealing with child-like innocence, it also implies the possibility of a safe, ordered existence free from irrationality and violence. As long as man is obedient to martial law, a system designed for his own protection as well as that of the captain and the King, he can live his life secure in the belief that he inhabits an orderly universe. When the narrator emphasizes the breakdown in the "symmetry of form" of his fiction, however, he exposes not only a flaw in his story but a crack in the foundation of that orderly world it describes.

Vere appears last to the reader not as the self-controlled stoic who witnesses Billy's execution, but as a dying man with his reason destroyed by the effects of opium. Killed in a battle with the "Athée," Vere is a victim of the formless forces of barbarism and irrationality. The "disruption of form going on across the Channel" reaches into his well-ordered world and destroys him. Although the "Athée" is finally defeated by the "Bellipotent" and the command of the ship is passed in an orderly fashion from Vere to the senior lieutenant as martial

\(^6\) The confidence man in his role as the man from the Black Rapids Coal Company is described as moving like "Orpheus in his gay descent to Tartarus" (C-M, 34).
order is apparently maintained, the narrator's comment that the "Athée" is the "aptest name . . . ever given to a warship" (XXVIII, 129) suggests another possibility. That the "Athée," nominal symbol of the formless world which Vere fears and despises, is at the same time a perfect representative of the orderly martial world which Vere himself commands suggests that chaos may in fact lurk within the forms themselves. This hint is strengthened when the reader remembers the narrator's earlier discussion of the incongruity implicit in the fact that in the man-of-war world the "Prince of Peace" serves in the "host of the God of War—Mars" (XXIV, 122). The presence of this one small paradox in a world which admits no ambiguities is enough to call into doubt the validity of the entire system.

Perhaps even more damaging to Vere and the world he represents is the narrator's suggestion that, had he lived, his spirit "spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition" (XXVIII, 129). This observation, when coupled with an earlier suggestion that the captain might have let himself "melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity," implies that there lurks within him the seeds of irrational and chaotic action. The narrator's equivocal hint that Vere may have been ambitious holds open the possibility that he acted not entirely on the dictates of military necessity in his handling of Billy's case. He may have been driven by a desire to avoid the possibility of any shadow's being cast on his official reputation. It is, of course, clear enough that the reader can never be sure of Vere's secret motives; the point is, however, that the mere presence of ambiguity is enough to undermine his world of "measured forms."

While the first of the three sequels casts ambiguous shadows on Vere's motives and on the stability of the "Bellipotent"'s world, the second tends to undercut the validity of the entire system on which the man-of-war world is founded. By basing his judgment of Billy on the practical and unambiguous law
of the Articles of War, Vere had thought himself able to avoid any confusing consideration of motive. The drumhead court which tries Billy has to deal in no way with problematical questions of “intent or non-intent” (172). The account of the Billy Budd-Claggart encounter which appears in an “authorized naval chronicle of the time” (XXIX, 130; italics mine), however, suggests that the martial world is not always singlemindedly devoted to pure fact. Not only are the facts of the experience falsified and distorted, but motives are deduced from the twisted facts. Claggart is said to have been “vindictively stabbed” (130); Billy is called depraved and Claggart judged “patriotic”; and additional irony is present in the fact that Budd, an Englishman of the “Saxon strain” (II, 51), is called an “alien,” while Claggart, who has a “bit of accent in his speech” (VIII, 65), is regarded as a pure Englishman.

The point is, of course, that Vere’s faith in the reliability of official forms is shown to be misplaced by the “authorized” but completely distorted report. Around the facts of the death of Claggart and the execution of Billy is constructed an official but completely fictional account of the situation. As the narrator points out, the description in the naval chronicle is the only report “that hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd” (XXIX, 131). The martial world is content to let the lie remain.

It is important to notice, however, that while the official account is full of lies, it is formally complete and leaves no doubt that at last all is right in the martial world. The criminal is judged and executed and “nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard H.M.S. Bellipotent” (131). Like the narrator’s account in the story proper, the “authorized” version ends with a statement of the triumph of “measured forms.” But the narrator, by making this official version of the story one of the “ragged edges” of his own “inside narrative,” destroys the illusion of order which both his own and the official versions
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imply. Just as Babo's disruption of the "measured forms" aboard the "San Dominick" exposes a shadow which permanently strains and calls into doubt the very foundation on which Cereno's world is built, so the drama which takes place on the "Bellipotent" puts the principles around which Vere's world is organized to a test which eventually results in their collapse.

The final "sequel" of *Billy Budd* is an account of another view of the events of the story which contrasts with the narrator's "inside" one. Knowing nothing of the "secret facts of the tragedy" (XXX, 131), the other sailors aboard the man-of-war rely on their instincts in making their evaluation of Billy Budd. The ballad "Billy in the Darbies," which is the "rude utterance" of their "general estimate of his nature" (131), is, in its own way, as much a distortion of the facts as the account in the naval chronicle. The sailors, although among the ruled rather than the rulers, are still a part of the man-of-war world; and thus it is that they accept the fact that Billy's punishment was "unavoidably inflicted from the naval point of view," although they "instinctively felt that Billy was ... as incapable of mutiny as of wilful murder" (131).

The ballad makes no attempt to detail the facts of the situation or to defend Billy's actions, but is merely a poetic account of his response to his impending death. Like the official version, however, it is controlled by the point of view of its composer, one of the sailors from Billy's watch. Filled with nautical terms and developed around a series of plays on words, the ballad is a perfect illustration of the sailor's view of the world. The ironic reverses of fortune which he learns to face and accept are present in the observations that the moon "will die in the dawning of Billy's last day"; "'tis me, not the sentence they'll suspend"; and "all is up; and I must up too" (132). Billy's child-like mind is incapable of even this mildly ironic perception: "to deal in double meanings ... of any sort was quite foreign to his nature" (I, 49). Similarly, the references to
“Bristol Molly” and the “drum roll to grog” are clearly references to aspects of the sailor's life which seem alien to “Baby Budd.”

Like the official account, then, the ballad illustrates the need for an “inside narrative” which records the true facts of Billy's life and death. Since the sailors do not question the law which destroys Billy, but, indeed, like Vere, seem to regard it as a tragic necessity demanded by the forms of the world in which they live, their account of his death is as fallacious as the “authorized” one.

The appalling truth of *Billy Budd* is not that innocence must be sacrificed to maintain the order of the world, but rather that innocence is destroyed by the forces of chaos and darkness masquerading as “measured forms.” The “Bellipotent” is the “Athée” hiding behind the cloak of the impostor chaplain she carries; and the Articles of War merely cover with an official mask the same irrational forces which are found undisguised “across the Channel.” As Babo and the confidence man illustrate, the forces of darkness and chaos achieve their greatest success when they take on and use the forms which men create in order to convince themselves that they live in an ordered world.

The glimpse into the nature of the “measured forms” is provided by the narrator of *Billy Budd* by the deliberate destruction of his fiction’s “symmetry of form.” In other words, the method of his story is the meaning of its theme; and his statement that “truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges” is not merely a commentary on the nature of fiction but on the nature of reality as well. Just as the colors of the spectrum are for Ishmael masks for that “colorless all color,” white, so to the narrators of “Benito Cereno” and *Billy Budd* the social, political, and religious forms of the world are but convenient disguises for that formless and chaotic force which underlies all things.
While the circumstances surrounding the writing of *Billy Budd* give a special import to John Middleton Murry's assertion that it was Melville's "last will and spiritual testament," there is little reason to suppose that E. L. Grant Watson's description of the story as Melville's "testament of acceptance" can have more than a limited application. Although it is true that the very fact of the story's existence implies that Melville modified the cynical view of fiction expressed in *The Confidence-Man*, *Billy Budd* is not the product of a sentimental senility or a second childhood.

In *Billy Budd* Melville returns to a narrative mode with which he had experimented earlier in "Benito Cereno," one which differs significantly from those used in his novel-length fictions. The narrators of these stories are not merely writers of fiction; they are, in effect, critics of their own work. Gifted, as it were, with a double consciousness, they create their fictions and then explicate them through study of sources. Finding that the stories they have told conceal the truth with their "symmetry of form," they add by way of "sequel" additional facts which, since they are outside the spatial and temporal dimensions of the narrative proper, destroy its formal unity. The disruptive power of the "sequels," however, does not derive from their status as representatives of a more real reality. On the contrary, these factual additions are shown to be as unreal as the fictional world they burden. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the fictional and factual realms results in the destruction of the authenticity of each and leaves the reader face to face with a positive emptiness, an oppressive and threatening blankness. Herman Melville's vision remains apocalyptic to the end. His metaphysics of emptiness led him to a recognition of the "secret absurdity" implicit in the novelist's commitment to "Vital Truth," and his devotion to that goal left silence as his only alternative.