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"Why moralize upon it?"

Questions of morality and guilt in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener", "Benito Cereno", and *Billy Budd, Sailor*

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1. Introduction

In the late fall of 2008, when the idea for this paper was beginning to take shape, the world was rocked by what was soon to be labeled "the worst financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression". In the wake of plummeting stock market prices, the collapse of investment banks and insurance companies, rampant home foreclosures and billions of dollars spent on federal bailout plans, the public reputation of Wall Street – the once-cherished symbol of American capitalism – hit a historic low, and is likely to remain there for some time to come. Politicians of all parties were quick to assure voters that their concern was for "average people on Main Street" and not for the presumed representatives of "corporate greed" on Wall Street. CNN showed desperate bankers and stock brokers pilgrimaging to Trinity Church, where they were hoping – so viewers were told – to contemplate their situation and maybe find some kind of inspiration from above.

Roughly around the same time – but on a far smaller scale – events in a quite different part of the globe were beginning to attract the attention of the western world. Navigation in the Gulf of Aden – the chokepoint of maritime trade between Europe and Asia – was increasingly threatened by Somali pirates hijacking cargo ships or tankers and releasing them only for considerable ransoms. In response to this worrying situation, the European Union, with UN and NATO backing, mounted an anti-piracy operation, uniting warships from different European countries in a single task force mandated to repel or arrest pirates trying to seize control of merchant ships. From time to time, pictures taken by EU vessels or by crewmembers of a hijacked ship appeared in the media, showing groups of dangerous looking young black men with rifles, semi-automatic pistols and even rocket launchers. Rather infrequently, the question was asked why someone would risk his life by using a tiny fishing boat to capture a gigantic cargo ship. Raging poverty in Somalia and over-exploitation of fishing grounds along the East African coast by international fishing fleets were sometimes mentioned in articles or TV reports.

Even if – for obvious reasons – no case of attempted mutiny and summary hanging on board a British man-of-war can be adduced to complete the picture, it is clear from the above examples that anyone writing about Melville's short fiction in the year 2009 need not look far to find events that testify to the continuing relevance of issues that occupied Melville more than one hundred years ago and inspired him to write some of his finest pieces of prose fiction. Yet despite the apparent reminiscences, it is important to emphasize that it is not only the *décor* of such stories as "Bartleby, the Scrivener", "Benito Cereno" and *Billy Budd, Sailor* that one reencounters in present-day reports about Wall Street and Somali pirates. If stock brokers walking down Wall Street to Trinity Church inevitably remind us of that 1853 "Story of Wall-Street" in which a lawyer "one Sunday morning … happened to go to Trinity Church", the more fascinating parallel is the questioning of the moral integrity of people on Wall Street that is now more *en vogue* than Melville probably could ever have imagined. And if reading the lines "Captain Delano … saw the Negroes … flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt" one cannot help but think of those modern-day pirates sporting assault-rifles and semi-automatic pistols, the more relevant point of similarity lies in the question of how such acts of piracy ought to be judged on a moral scale. Are those pirates simply vicious because they act unlawfully in an attempt to enrich themselves or are they innocent because sheer poverty forces them to act the way they do? Or are we dealing with an ambiguous situation that allows for no simple and definite moral evaluation?

Questions such as these – generalizable into the paramount question of what constitutes moral and immoral actions – inform all of Melville's writing and, to a large degree, account for its continuing appeal. Some of the most probing examinations of the human capacity for good and evil can be found in the short stories and novellas that Melville wrote for *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* between 1853 and 1856. Two of these stories will be looked at in this paper: "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and "Benito Cereno" (1855). While the former examines the reaction of a prudent Wall Street lawyer to an infuriatingly unresponsive scrivener, the latter follows a good-natured American sea captain on board a mysterious Spanish slave ship. Although very different in setting and what one might call "surface topic" – Wall Street capitalism on the one hand and slavery on

the other – both stories have a very similar basic configuration: a confident person is unexpectedly confronted with the mysterious "other" that challenges his snug and comfortable outlook on life. In both cases, this other figure – Bartleby, Benito Cereno and Babo – is dead by the end of the story and the reader is left with the nagging question of who is to blame for what has happened. This basic pattern also applies to a short novel which Melville began thirty years after writing for *Putnam's* and which was left unfinished at his death in 1891. *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924) shows yet another "man of the world" who is – literally – caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, the devil being the iniquitous master-at-arms and the deep blue sea being the blue-eyed Handsome Sailor. While all three stories thus invite moral judgment of their non-title characters, they never openly prescribe what kind of verdict readers should pass on them. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that 20th-century critics have proposed radically contrasting evaluations of the characters that are involved in these stories.[1]

In my following analysis, I do not pretend to suggest a completely novel approach which is capable of resolving all the critical debates surrounding the various characters of Melville's short fiction. I am confident, however, that by pursuing a comparative approach and by considering several interpretative aspects simultaneously I will be able to offer some new insight into the nature of the moral dilemmata that Melville examines and the kind of conclusion that readers are encouraged to reach. The most important aspect that will be considered is the way in which Melville uses narrative technique – and in particular point of view – in describing morally ambiguous situations. The formal differences between the

[1] In the case of "Benito Cereno", earlier critics readily assigned the label "evil" to the black "pirates" (Cf. Rosalie Feltenstein, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno'". *American Literature* 19.3 (1947): 245-55), whereas more recent interpretations focus on the wrongdoings of the whites in the context of colonization and slavery (Cf. Allan Moore Emery, "The Topicality of Depravity in 'Benito Cereno'". *American Literature* 55.3 (1983): 316-31). Some condemn the Wall Street lawyer of "Bartleby" because he fails to live up to the Christian imperative of love (Cf. William Bysshe Stein, "Bartleby: the Christian Conscience". *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1966. 104-12), while others tend to exculpate him because they believe that he should not be judged by such high standards (Cf. Harold Schechter, "Bartleby the Chronometer". *Studies in Short Fiction* 19.4 (1982): 359-66). Similarly, some critics feel that Melville clearly condemns Captain Vere for executing Billy Budd (Cf. Joyce Sparer Adler, "*Billy Budd* and Melville's Philosophy of War". *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 91.2 (1976): 266-78), while others argue that he supplies so many mitigating circumstances that Vere emerges as a dutiful captain who is committed to maintaining order on board his ship for the sake of protecting the safety and freedom of Britain and the world (Cf. Christopher W. Sten, "Vere's Use of the 'Forms': Means and Ends in *Billy Budd*". *American Literature* 47. 1 (1975): 37-51).

first-person narrator of “Bartleby”, the limited point of view employed in “Benito Cereno” and the omniscient narrator of *Billy Budd* are readily perceivable. But how exactly does the choice of one particular perspective determine our understanding and evaluation of the actions of the morally challenged protagonists in these stories? A secondary aspect that can help answer this question is the use of Christian and classical imagery and allusions. Again, Melville’s penchant for metaphors drawn from the spheres of Christian religion and classical antiquity is apparent in any of his works. Yet how are the two categories made to interact in the three stories here considered and what does this tell us about the message that the narrator intends to convey? A final aspect, which will not be considered independently, but in conjunction with the two aspects just mentioned, is the construction of character constellations. How does the use of a particular point of view and a certain combination of Christian and/or classical images contribute to the description of the main characters of the stories and how do they relate to one another? Of particular interest in this context is of course the central non-title character facing a morally difficult situation.

The more general aspects just mentioned translate into largely comparable approaches in the analysis and interpretation of the three texts that will be considered. In the case of “Bartleby”, the narrator will first be shown to be a conscious narrator who uses the piece of literature he composes for an extended self-portrait and as a means of contemplating his situation in life. It will become clear that his use of Christian and classical imagery hints at an understanding of what is right and wrong and some – partial – awareness of his own moral deficiency. The figure of Bartleby, as well as the other three office clerks, will be seen to function as fictitious constituents of the process of introspection that the lawyer engages in. In dealing with “Benito Cereno”, the deliberate structuring of the story and the conspicuous parallels between the first part and the deposition in the second part will be examined. The narrator, as will become apparent, deliberately uses a limited point of view in order to condemn the “good-natured” American Amasa Delano, who is wholly unaware of the actual power relations on board the San Dominick. The use of Christian imagery will be shown to add to the indictment of European colonization in particular and Western arrogance and racism in general. *Billy Budd*, finally, will emerge as the most conspicuously

incongruous of all three texts, both with regard to the omniscient narrator, who does not seem to follow any identifiable ideological agenda, and to the use of Christian and classical allusions, which, unlike in "Bartleby", are not used to contrast clearly discernible moral categories. It will be concluded that if Melville's last work is also his most ambiguous, this is due to the way in which the narrator misleads the reader by confronting him with hopelessly incoherent and contradictory pieces of information.

2. "Bartleby, the Scrivener" – The inscrutable lawyer

2.1. The self-conscious narrator

After all that has been said about Bartleby's nameless employer, there is still one peculiarity about him that I think is worth pointing out, namely his role as a self-conscious narrator. The lawyer's awareness of this role is particularly obvious in the first and final paragraphs of "Bartleby", which contain several instances of explicit reference to the process of writing a story and presenting it to a reader. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator underlines the novelty of his subject matter – scriveners – by saying that "nothing that I know of has ever been written" (3) about them. He then specifies that his narrative will not be about one of the ordinary representatives of this "somewhat singular set of men"[2] (3), but about one particular law-copyist – "the strangest I ever saw or heard of" (3). Having thus defined his topic, the narrator has more to say about the nature of his narrative. Although he calls it a "biography" (3), he is aware that it is not a very prototypical one, given the lack of "materials" and "original sources" (3) that a biographer normally draws on. By referring to this lack of information as a "irreparable loss to literature" (3) he seems to imply that his account of Bartleby is not strictly speaking a biography but rather a piece of literature. For the rest of the story the narrator refrains from commenting on his writing. Yet once the actual

[2] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales*. Ed. Robert Milder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 3. All page references in this Zulassungsarbeit – including the chapters on "Benito Cereno" and *Billy Budd* – will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

narrative of Bartleby has come to a end, the narrator intervenes again, referring twice to the story he has just told ("this history" (40), "this little narrative" (40)) and also to himself, "the present narrator" (41).

It is important to note that the lawyer's awareness of his role as a narrator is not limited to such meta-narrative reflections about his authorship and the nature of his writing. Making use of the narrative power at his disposal, he adds two segments to his account of Bartleby's life, which are decisive to our understanding of the relation between the lawyer and his mysterious scrivener. The first of these supplements is "one little item of rumor" (41) that the narrator recounts "ere parting with the reader" (40) and that he announces at the outset of his story as a "vague report which will appear in the sequel" (3). Although the lawyer is fully aware of the uncertain veracity of this piece of information, he feels the need to include it in his narrative. The reason for this feeling may well be that this dubious piece of information does not pertain so much to the unaccountable scrivener, but to the lawyer himself. The rumor he chooses to relate – "that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration" (41) – recalls the lawyer's own fate, which he laments at the beginning of the story: "I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a – premature act" (4). This striking analogy would also explain why the lawyer asserts that "this vague report has not been without a certain strange suggestive interest to me" (41). The suggestiveness of Bartleby's fate stems from the fact that it represents a marginally modified account of his own change in fortune.

The second segment that the narrator adds to the bare account of Bartleby's life is even more clearly concerned with his own personality and professional life. The lawyer is quite emphatic about the necessity of including this section: "Ere introducing the scrivener … it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employés*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented" (3). What then follows is largely consistent with the lawyer's announcement. After a short description of the lawyer

himself and his office a rather lengthy portrait of his three clerks is drawn up. How "indispensable to an adequate understanding" of Bartleby can this kind of information really be? While some of the information in the introductory passage – about the layout of the office and the clerks' character traits, for example – may give us a clearer idea of some of the later events, such as Bartleby's "dead-wall reveries" (21) and the clerks' changing reactions to his inexplicable behavior, none of it is strictly speaking relevant to an understanding of who or what Bartleby really is. If the lawyer insists that "some such description is indispensable", this is because he uses it for a presentation of his own character and station in life. Seen from this perspective, "Bartleby" appears to be less the scrivener's biography than the lawyer's autobiography.

Substantiating proof of this claim can be found by examining the line of characterizations that the lawyer follows in describing first himself, then his clerks and finally his experiences with Bartleby. The first part, in which the lawyer talks about himself, is a rather candid self-portrait of an *homme moyen* who is aware of his professional limitations – "I am one of those unambitious lawyers" (3) – and his pronounced desire for an ordered, comfortable and largely uneventful life. Hence his assertion that "the easiest way of life is the best" (3) and his insistence that his acquaintances consider him "an eminently *safe* man" (4). It should not be forgotten that these character traits are brought to our knowledge by the lawyer himself. This does not mean, however, that he is conscious of all his negative qualities or that he is totally outspoken about all aspects concerning his professional activities. His triple reference to John Jacob Astor not only betrays a certain air of vanity, but also points to Astor's utilitarian philosophy and the unfortunate role he played in the foreclosure of defaulting debtors' homes[3] – associations the lawyer prefers to suppress because they would shed a dubious light on his treatment of Bartleby. The mention of the office of Master in Chancery is another example of this technique. The lawyer self-revealingly complains about the abrogation of this "pleasantly remunerative" (4) office, which would have earned him "a life-lease of the profits" (4), but he loses no word about

[3] Cf. Mario D'Avanzo, "Melville's 'Bartleby' and John Jacob Astor". *The New England Quarterly* 41.2 (1968): 259-64 and Thomas Dilworth, "Narrator of 'Bartleby': The Christian-Humanist Acquaintance of John Jacob Astor". *Papers on Language and Literature* 38.1 (2002): 49-75.

the responsibilities this office normally includes. This is hardly surprising because in doing so he would have to admit that it normally involves the hearing of home foreclosure cases.[4] Even more damaging is perhaps the lawyer's inadvertent avowal that he only indulges in "dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages" (4) when his own financial interests are concerned. All things considered, one can conclude that the limited sense of self-awareness that is perceptible in the lawyer is severely curtailed by conceit, complacence and the importance he attaches to money.

Whether one finds this analysis too lenient or too harsh, there can be no doubt that the lawyer's self-characterization is plainly worded, firmly grounded in reality and the reader has no reason to believe that the narrator wants him to understand more than he says. This matter-of-fact tone changes when the narrator turns to a description of his three office clerks, in particular Nippers and Turkey. Both clerks are described in a way that underlines their "ordinarily human" (12) character, thereby setting them apart from their co-worker Bartleby. This concerns both their outward appearance – Turkey being "a short, pursy Englishman" (5) and Nippers "a whiskered, sallow, and … rather piratical-looking young man" (7) – and their behavior while they are at work. Turkey sometimes "made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on to the floor in a sudden passion" (5), and Nippers, plagued by "ambition and indigestion" (7), "could never get his table to suit him. He put chips under it, blocks of various sorts, bits of pasteboard, and at last went so far as to attempt an exquisite adjustment by final pieces of folded blotting paper" (7). All of this is very much in the vein of realistic character portrayal. So much so that the two law-copyists have been taken to be an illustration of the Marxist doctrine of social alienation in capitalist societies.[5] Yet this down-to-earth tone does not remain unchanged during the whole segment dedicated to the lawyer's clerks. The narrator also offers a metaphorical description of their changing moods that is so obviously an artificial adaptation of reality that readers are forced to surmise that it is intended to do more than just describe the eccentricities of two office employees. We are told that Turkey's face

[4] Dilworth, "Narrator of 'Bartleby'", 65-67.
[5] Louise K. Barnett, "Bartleby as Alienated Worker". *Studies in Short Fiction* 11 (1974): 379-85.

"was of a fine florid hue, but after twelve o'clock, meridian … it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing – but, as it were, with a gradual wane – till 6 o'clock, P.M." (5). Despite the Christmas coals simile, this is still a rather inconspicuous description of Turkey's alcohol-induced ruddiness. A second simile, comparing the clerk's blazing face with the regular path of the sun in the sky (5), goes one step further in highlighting the deliberately contrived regularity of the process, linking two wholly unrelated phenomena – the clerk's face and the sun. The rationale behind the narrator's insistence on Turkey's gradually changing complexion – and mood – becomes apparent when the second clerk is described and the reader learns that "the irritability and consequent nervousness of Nippers, were mainly observable in the morning, while in the afternoon he was comparatively mild" (9). The narrator makes sure the reader perceives the complementarity involved in this description of the clerks by pointing out that their "fits relieved each other like guards. When Nippers' was on, Turkey's was off; and *vice versa*" (9). Mildly humorous in tone, this simile confirms that the narrator, by ostensibly talking about his employees, reveals one of his own character traits: He likes things to be neatly ordered and arranged in a way that makes them controllable, rationalizable – profitable. His concluding remark, "This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances" (9) must be taken to be unintentionally ironic, considering the measures he takes to contain the effects of Turkey's "irrational" afternoon moods. When his suggestion that Turkey work only in the morning (6) is turned down, he accepts to keep him full time, "resolving, nevertheless, to see to it, that during the afternoon he had to do with my less important papers" (6-7). Far from being a credibly natural arrangement, the office clerks' taking turns at being irritable – or, rather, the way in which their employer describes and responds to this phenomenon – bespeaks the lawyer's efforts to contain and rationalize forces leading to disturbance and unproductiveness.

Turkey's and Nipper's nature is thus twofold. They are realistically rendered office workers, but they are also symbolic figures used to disclose the lawyer's personality. In addition to the formalized language he uses to describe them, there are even more explicit statements regarding the values that are dear to this Wall Street man. The coat he offers his unseemly clerk Turkey ("a highly-

respectable looking coat of my own, a padded gray coat, of a most comfortable warmth, and which buttoned straight up from the knee to the neck" (8)) not only indicates his desire for propriety and his attempt to contain – "button up" – irrational behavior, it also links the clerks and their symbolic function to the unaccountable Bartleby. The lawyer is twice shown buttoning himself up before attempting to dismiss his resistant employee. In the first case, where he lawyer tells Bartleby to "quit this place" (26), the link between the buttoning of the coat and the dismissal is even more explicit than in the second case ("What shall I do? what ought I to do?" (33)), where the lawyer seems to be reasoning with himself about the right course of action and the buttoning up of his "highly-respectable looking coat" must be interpreted as a metaphor for his gathering his faculties and assuring himself that he is still capable of controlling elements which intrude the peace and quiet of his carefully rationalized world. What is important in both cases is that the lawyer, by acting on himself, is actually trying to act on Bartleby. The coat thus serves to link the lawyer and Bartleby and can even be taken to contribute to the conflation of their identities. The role of the clerks, in this context, is to prepare the reader for a symbolic understanding of the relations that hold between the lawyer and his employees. The symbolic overtones that are perceptible when the lawyer wraps Turkey in a gray[6] coat of his prepare the reader for the more far-reaching implications of the lawyer's buttoning himself up while trying to interact with Bartleby.

Leaving all these symbolic interpretations aside, two instances of the lawyer's using his clerks to describe his own personality can be detected by looking at the reasons he himself gives for keeping his employees despite their obvious professional shortcomings. Talking about Turkey, he says that "he was in many ways a most valuable person to me, … accomplishing a great deal of work in a style not easy to be matched" (6). His evaluation of Nippers is hardly

[6] The fact that the coat is gray corroborates a symbolic interpretation insofar as the color gray is used to link the lawyer – it is his coat –, the clerks – the coat is given to one of them – and Bartleby, who has gray eyes (12). In "Benito Cereno", the "gray surtout" (164) of the opening scene serves to alert the reader to the ambiguities of the story and warns against drawing clear lines of demarcation between its characters and their supposed moral quality. Even if the color gray is much less prominent in "Bartleby" than in "Benito Cereno", it still makes sense to assume that the grayness associated with all characters of the story has a comparable meaning. It is supposed to sensitize readers to the possibility that the clerks are not individually defined persons, but symbolic devices the lawyer makes use of in the process of composing his self-portrait.

different: “But with all his failings, and the annoyances he caused me, Nippers … was a very useful man to me; wrote a neat, swift hand” (7-8). The lawyer carefully weighs the gains he makes and the losses he incurs by not dismissing his subordinates and is clearly not motivated by any kind of charitable feeling. This utilitarian mindset, which recalls the lawyer’s early reference to John Jacob Astor, is certainly among the most damning revelations he makes about his striving for “pleasantly remunerative” arrangements – at least in the domain of his professional life. Yet, for the sake of fairness, one passage which shows the lawyer to be more humane and compassionate, should not be overlooked. When Turkey is criticized for blotting his copies, he replies, “with submission, sir, behold these hairs! I am getting old … With submission, sir, we *both* are getting old” (6). The lawyer’s comment, “This appeal to my fellow-feeling was hardly to be resisted” (6) is very similar to his later realization that the “bond of a common humanity” (20) links him to his miserable office clerk Bartleby. What is even more, in both cases the lawyer does not follow up on his more charitable impulse, but falls back on his possessiveness and his utilitarian philosophy. In the first case, he makes arrangements for Turkey to handle less important documents in the afternoon; in the second case, he secretly examines Bartleby’s desk, justifying his intrusiveness with the revealing remark, “… besides, the desk is mine, and its contents too” (21). This final example once again shows that there are strong parallels between the lawyer’s description of his dealings with Turkey and Nippers and the things he later tells us about his experiences with Bartleby.

After all those observations concerning Turkey and Nippers, one question concerning the lawyer-narrator remains. How self-conscious can we reasonably consider him to be? Is he aware that all the information he gives us about Turkey and Nippers serves to describe his own character, that – metaphorically speaking – they are the surface on which his vapory personality condenses and becomes visible? Does he use this narrative device deliberately? The lawyer’s indication that “some such description [of the clerks] is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented” suggests that he is indeed aware of what he is doing. If his aim were really to write Bartleby’s biography, he would sooner or later realize that the whole section devoted to Turkey and Nippers does nothing to improve a reader’s understanding of

Bartleby's life and ultimate fate. Since it does give us a rather clear idea of the kind of life the lawyer leads, one might surmise that the introductory section has been included to prepare readers for "an adequate understanding" not of Bartleby, but of the metaphorical nature of the subsequent part of the story which is devoted to Bartleby, and which – as we will see – functions in exactly the same way as the introductory section. Ultimately, whether or not the lawyer follows a narrative strategy remains impossible to decide because there are simply not enough explicit meta-fictional comments. It is true that many remarks that implicate disclosures of the lawyer's personality seem to be voluntary on the part of Melville, but rather unintentional on the part of the narrator. This allows for two interpretations: Either the lawyer, in the first part of "Bartleby" at least, really has no more than a very limited awareness of the effect of his narrative choices, or he is in fact conscious of the broader metaphorical framework that he has designed for his story, but from time to time, due to the incomplete nature of his self-consciousness, inadvertently slips into self-revelatory remarks about his employees.

2.2.The lawyer and Bartleby

Following the short introductory section presenting Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut, the narrator immediately introduces Bartleby. Not only does the unaccountable scrivener fulfill the same professional function as his co-workers, he also has the same narrative function.[7] Certainly less of a realistic character than Turkey and Nippers, he is even more susceptible to an interpretation that identifies him as a narrative device which the narrator – again, more or less consciously – uses in the process of meditating on his own self and his own life. Two facts about the scrivener confirm this interpretation. Firstly, Bartleby is continually described in a way that makes it difficult to perceive of him as a real and living human being. Secondly, there is a certain number of details in the lawyer's narrative that suggest a resemblance between Bartleby and the lawyer himself.

[7] Michael Murphy ("'Bartleby, the Scrivener': A Simple Reading". *The Arizona Quarterly* 41.2 (1985): 143-51) ignores this point and claims that the clerks are just as unreal as the scrivener.

What may be most remarkable about Bartleby is the fact that his physical existence is much less firmly established than that of the other office clerks. As in the case of Turkey and Nippers, it is the way in which the lawyer-narrator refers and reacts to Bartleby that fashions our understanding of the scrivener's nature and calls into question the reality of his existence. This concerns first of all the lawyer's insistence that no materials exist for an objective verification of Bartleby's identity and that his narrative is no more than a transcription of his personal experiences (3). This emphasis on the limited scope of information that is available to the lawyer can be seen to suggest that Bartleby – much more than his co-workers Turkey and Nippers – is merely a figment of the lawyer's mind which serves to further elaborate his own self-portrait. Many of the lawyer's remarks that seem to emphasize the scrivener's mysteriousness as a person can be adduced to confirm this interpretation. The observation that Bartleby never utters a word unless he is spoken to, never goes to dinner and "eats nothing but ginger-nuts" (15) makes it almost impossible to perceive him as a human being. The fact that he never leaves the office (14) suggests that Bartleby's existence is not only limited to the office space but also bound to the presence of the lawyer and his perception of the scrivener. The metaphorical nature of Bartleby that this interpretation implies is confirmed by the hyperbolic observation that Bartleby "seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic" (26). This metaphorical reference to the supposed fact that Bartleby has no relatives makes of him a prototypical "charity case", a symbolic incentive for the lawyer to look beyond his office world and take notice of his shipwrecked fellow men.[8]

The material existence of Bartleby is further challenged by a rather practical contrivance of the lawyer's. The folding screen that he puts up around

[8] David Andrews ("'Benito Cereno': No Charity On Earth, Not Even At Sea". *Leviathan* 2.1 (2000): 83-103) emphasizes the importance of this somewhat incongruous nautical metaphor. It is possible, as Andrews does, to maintain that the lawyer uses it to express his charitable obligations towards Bartleby. On the other hand, the lawyer does not say that Bartleby definitely has no relatives. He merely says that "he had *declined telling* who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world" (21; my emphasis). The lawyer wishes that "he would but have *named* a single relative or friend (26; my emphasis) and chooses his words carefully when he says that "he *seemed* alone, absolutely alone in the universe" (26; my emphasis). This would suggest that the orphaned Bartleby is part of the lawyer's attempt to invent a character that is apt to put him in a morally difficult situation.

Bartleby's desk (10) effectively effaces the most distinct aspect of the scrivener's reality, which is his visibility, so that in many instances the other characters of the story perceive merely acoustic reverberations of his existence. Interestingly, this remaining aspect of his existence is undermined by the lawyer's frequent reference to Bartleby's noiselessness: He is characterized as "silent" no less than eight times and the epithet "noiseless" is used twice.

Apart from the frequent use of adjectives and adverbs denoting noiselessness, the language that the lawyer uses to describe Bartleby offers several other indications that he does not intend to present Bartleby as a real-life character. Bartleby is described as "pale" or "pallid" 14 times, and the notion of lifelessness implied by these adjectives is enforced by the triple use of the word "cadaverous". It should also be noted that it is the lawyer who applies the adjective "dead" to the walls that Bartleby stares at and that it is also he who decides to include the rumor about the Dead Letter Office, which again links Bartleby to the motif of death. Another characterization which belongs to the sphere of supernatural phenomena is the lawyer's use of the word "ghost". Not only is the word used to exclude Bartleby from the realm of human beings ("this man, or rather ghost" (33)), it also introduces one of the typical paraphernalia of magic – the number three, which is normally associated with ghost stories and fairy tales: "Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third summons, he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage" (17). This number is not only used to underline the ghost-like, i.e. unreal, nature of Bartleby, it also appears on a much subtler level; it is enmeshed in the micro-structure of the plot. The period of time spanning from Bartleby's arrival to the lawyer's remark that he has become accustomed to the scrivener's eccentricities (10-17) consists of precisely three instances of refusal to work on the part of Bartleby. In each of these cases of resistance Bartleby's infamous "I would prefer not to" is uttered thrice.[9] The same pattern occurs later in the story, when the scrivener uses his mysterious "I am not particular" three times in his replies to the lawyer. This deliberately artificial structure not only highlights Bartleby's symbolic nature as a character, it also suggests a reconsideration of the meaning of the number three

[9] This count is precise if "I prefer not to" (13, 17) is considered a variant and "I *prefer* not" (17) discounted as a clarifying remark.

and its relation to the scrivener. While it certainly makes sense to include the number in a list of Christian allusions in the story, it should also be considered outside a Christian context. The omnipresence of the number three in many non-Christian religions, in ancient mythology and in philosophy is obvious enough. Less evident in the context of "Bartleby" is the fact that the number also has its place in literary theory. From Aristotle's specification that a drama should have a beginning, a middle and an end to the introduction-main part-conclusion structure of any term paper, the number three has always served to impose a structure on pieces of literature, or indeed any piece of writing. On a more microscopic level, the tricolon is certainly among the most universally used rhetorical figures, linking Cesar's "veni, vidi, vici" to Barack Obama's "yes we can" rhetoric. If the use of such tripartite structures draws attention to an author's conscious effort to shape his narrative, the lawyer's arrangement of the scrivener's utterances and actions in threefold structures – in combination with the way in which he casts doubt on the reality of Bartleby's existence – indicates that the scrivener is not meant to be understood as a real person and that readers are encouraged to apply a truly symbolic reading to his supposed "biography".

In addition to the elements just mentioned, there are other peculiarities which support the thesis that the lawyer and the scrivener are not two distinct persons, but that the latter is the product of the former's imagination. First of all, the incongruence between the lawyer's inability to act on Bartleby and the scrivener's influence on his employer must be addressed. Independently of what the lawyer intends to do, the fact remains that throughout the narrative he cannot bring himself to enforce Bartleby's dismissal. The most striking instance of this inability is the lawyer's exasperated threat "I shall feel bound – indeed I *am* bound – to – to – to quit the premises myself!" (36). The suspension of the final verb of action – and the fact that the verb, when it is uttered, indicates an action that impinges on the lawyer himself – suggests that Bartleby's employer is inhibited by some interior force to act on the unyielding scrivener. Interestingly, the only influence that the lawyer is both willing and able to exert on Bartleby is of a similarly "interior" nature. Adhering to a peculiar "doctrine of assumptions" (29) the lawyer makes prospective ("I *assumed* the ground that depart he must" (27)) and even retrospective ("… now I might retrospectively assume that departed he

was" (29)) assumptions about the scrivener's behavior. He goes as far as to assume that "pretending not to see Bartleby at all, [he might] walk straight against him as if he were air" (29). This is a surprising approach for a man who prides himself on his "prudence" and "method". It is less surprising if we take this doctrine to be a psychological response to an interior process. If Bartleby is part of such a psychological process, it would indeed make sense for the lawyer to try to convince himself that he is capable of controlling it by sheer will power.

A psychological reading is further supported by the scrivener's influence on the lawyer, which is also marked by the absence of any kind of physical interaction. The lawyer cannot grasp this "wondrous ascendancy" (28) and vaguely speaks of "something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me" (13). This ascendancy not only causes the lawyer to obey orders given by his employee (19), it also has a tellingly psychological effect on his language ("I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer'" (24)) and on that of his office clerks. Considering the narrative function of the office clerks and the points of similarity between the lawyer, his clerks and Bartleby that have already been mentioned, the lawyer's insistence that Bartleby's mental influence pertains not only to himself but also to his clerks (25) suggests that this influence does not operate between Bartleby and his employer, but that it is a visible sign of a psychological process going on in the lawyer's mind.

A final point that is worth mentioning concerns some further similarities between the lawyer and his mysterious employee. Apart from their common experience of losing a job due to a change in the political system, they also display some surprising physical and character-related resemblances: The lawyer is "safe" and "prudent"; the scrivener is of "singularly sedate an aspect" (10). The lawyer's concern for respectable and decorous demeanor – he complains about Turkey's "indecorous" (5) behavior – is mirrored by his description of Bartleby, who is both "respectable" (10) and "eminently decorous" (19). Finally, the short reference to the lawyer's trip in his rockaway contains the remark "In fact I almost lived in my rockaway for the time" (37), which is strangely reminiscent of the lawyer's discovery that Bartleby has made his home in his employer's Wall Street

office. These examples show that, despite his continuing exasperation at the scrivener's behavior, the lawyer continually inserts pieces of information in his narrative which support the thesis that the different groups of characters – Bartleby, his clerks and himself – are not to be seen as distinct entities, but rather as three different embodiments of one entity – the lawyer.

2.3. The inner conflict of the lawyer

As the preceding chapters have shown, the narrator of "Bartleby" provides a large amount of information that allows us to read his account as a piece of serious self-reflection. If this is so, then the narrator's announcement that he is not interested in telling the story of some queer scrivener, "at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep" (3), acquires a much deeper meaning than might be evident upon first reading the lawyer's introductory remarks. Far from relating a singular case for the sake of merriment or emotional agitation, the lawyer gives the moral interest of his story a much broader scope. Against the background of the narrator's efforts to set off the clerks' and Bartleby's unrealistic and functional nature from his own realistically rounded character, his final exclamation "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" (41) may even be taken to imply that his concern extends to an all-mankind-embracing exploration of what defines moral and immoral behavior.

Even if this far-reaching approach is rejected, the lawyer's keen interest in his own moral constitution and actions cannot be denied. In fact, the examination of his own moral conduct is a logical continuation of his description of the office clerks and Bartleby, which also serves the purpose of allowing the reader to grasp the lawyer's character. The most interesting aspect of this continued self-examination is the revelation that the lawyer's psyche is defined by the existence of two distinct and conflicting principles. The constant oscillation between these principles, which may most concisely be labeled "charity" and "reason", has been noted by a number of critics who have examined the relationship between the

scrivener and his employer.[10] In two more recent studies, Thomas Dilworth and Steven Ryan[11] reconsider the lawyer's internal conflict by paying special attention to his use of Christian and classical allusions. As they convincingly show, metaphors drawn from the spheres of Christian religion and classical antiquity are used in a very coherent way to denote the two philosophic sources from which the lawyer draws in his reaction to his employee's unaccountable behavior. Ryan, who focuses on the importance of references to Cicero as a paragon of pre-Christian philosophy, highlights one particular scene in which a classical understanding of love and friendship, as expressed by the ancient Roman lawyer in his treatise *Laelius de amicitia*, is particularly relevant to an adequate interpretation of the lawyer's behavior towards Bartleby. While the lawyer, "resolved … to dismiss" (23) his defaulting employee, talks to Bartleby, the scrivener fixes his gaze on the lawyer's bust of Cicero. He even displays "the faintest conceivable tremor of the white attenuated mouth" (23), which is, as Ryan correctly observes, "the most emotion Bartleby displays within the entire story".[12] This incidence is denotative of the influence of classical reasonableness on the lawyer's thoughts and behavior. According to Cicero's writings, genuine friendship is always subject to one central condition, which is the virtue of the person that is to be accepted as a friend. Given Bartleby's outrageous lack of virtue, the lawyer, from Cicero's point of view, is thus not blameworthy for failing to accept and love Bartleby as a friend. Ryan insists that Cicero's philosophy "is concerned with *reasonable* generosity"[13] and that, according to this concept, generosity is a desirous quality only if its distribution is governed by reason. The outcome of this postulated conjunction is the "*prudentially* generous man"[14] who bestows his philanthropy according to the potential beneficiary's qualities and merits. This Ciceronian concept is clearly present in the passage introduced above: The lawyer asks Bartleby "what *reasonable* objection" (23; my italics) he may possibly have to speak to him; he is irritated by his employee's blank refusal to answer because "his perverseness seemed *ungrateful*" (23; my

[10] Cf. Todd F. Davis, "The Narrator's Dilemma in 'Bartleby the Scrivener'". *Studies in Short Fiction* 34 (1997): 138-92 and Allan Silver, "The Lawyer and the Scrivener". *Partisan Review* 48.2 (1981): 409-424.
[11] Steven T. Ryan, "Cicero's Head in Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener'". *English Language Notes* 43.2 (2005): 116-33 and Dilworth, "Narrator of 'Bartleby'", which has already been cited.
[12] Ryan, "Cicero's Head", 117.
[13] Ibidem, 125.
[14] Ibidem, 126.

italics). Bartleby has shown himself to be unworthy of any token of friendship or support, hence the lawyer, as a reasonable man, cannot be expected to squander his helpfulness despite the scrivener's want of virtue. It is important to note, however, that the lawyer is not influenced by this particular mindset alone. The passage at hand shows very clearly that there is a constant co-occurrence of patterns of behavior determined by reason and incentives of charity urging the lawyer to comply with the example set by Jesus in the New Testament. Indeed, the lawyer's complaint about Bartleby is immediately followed by a moment of – apparently unworldly – inspiration which exhorts him to be lenient towards Bartleby: "I strangely felt something *superstitious* knocking at my heart … denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind" (23; my italics).

This example is by no means singular in the text. Talking about the first two instances of refusal on the part of Bartleby, the lawyer uses two pieces of imagery, the first of which is classical ("my pale plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero" (12)) and the second of which is Christian ("I was turned into a pillar of salt" (13)).[15] This scene functions as a template which establishes a dual set of categories that can be used to classify the totality of the lawyer's feelings and actions pertaining to his employee. While the rational category is defined in terms of Cicero's philosophy, the Christian category directly draws on Jesus' doctrine of unconditional love. As Dilworth emphasizes, "[f]or Jesus, and therefore for Christians, love is basic, indispensable, and not to be bestowed selectively".[16] This Christian concept of unconditional love necessarily conflicts with the classical idea of merited love. The lawyer, by allowing us to read his thoughts in a large number of situations that bring him in contact with Bartleby, reveals the sweeping and continuing effect that this conflict has on his thoughts and actions.

In the first situation in which charitable and reasonable promptings are shown to co-occur the lawyer remarks that a person "of a not inhumane temper … will endeavor charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to

[15] The pillar of salt is a clear reference to the biblical story about Lot's wife, who was punished for ignoring God's command. Is this a subtle hint that the lawyer is aware that he deserves punishment for his uncharitable reaction to Bartleby?
[16] Dilworth, "Narrator of 'Bartleby'", 55.

be solved by his judgment" (15). This charitable effort, however, is seamlessly transformed into rather calculating considerations: "Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby … will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience" (15). The unchristian nature of this remark is highlighted by its – doubtlessly ironic – lexical allusion to a word by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (6:19-20): "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth … but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven". Another example of a transition from compassion to emotional detachment prompted by reason can be found in the lawyer's remark that "[t]o a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such a pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it" (22). This kind of "prudential feeling" (22) urges the lawyer to retreat from a Christian, i.e. charitable, line of action.

The most explicit reference to Jesus as a beacon of charity is contained in one of the lawyer's efforts to control his anger at Bartleby's behavior: "But when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why, simply by recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another'" (30). Similarly to the example mentioned above, this initial commitment to Christian values is immediately supplanted by wholly self-centered, and therefore by definition unchristian, arguments: "Mere self-interest … should … prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy" (30). This example also demonstrates the construction throughout the story of a nexus of references to charity and the perversion of this principle. The mention of Adam is mirrored by the lawyer's sympathetic comment that both he and his employee are "sons of Adam" (20). This double evocation of Adam is apt to conjure up the story of Adam's son Cain, who murdered his brother Abel. This story, in turn, is alluded to in the lawyer's account of "the tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt" (30). The identity of the initials and the fact that it is the man with the initial C who kills the man with the initial A leave no doubt that the narrator wants readers to see a connection between the two stories.[17] The purpose of this complex

[17] Cf. Joseph Matthew Meyer, "Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'". *Explicator* 64.2 (2006): 89-90.

construct is less clear. Is the lawyer praising himself for not following Cain's example or is he unintentionally indicting himself by reminding the reader what one of the "sons of Adam" he refers to did to his brother? The lawyer's surmise that it was "the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, up stairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations" (30) that prompted Colt to kill Adams hints at some kind of awareness that the office world, to which he himself belongs, is not supportive of humane feelings and charitableness. The surprising statement that Colt was more unfortunate than Adams goes in the same direction. It indicates that the lawyer is aware of the divine punishment that Cain received and that he understands this punishment to answer Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9) in the affirmative.

Towards the end of the story there is another example of this kind of scriptural allusion which is worth mention. After moving office, the lawyer is questioned on the subject of Bartleby on two occasions. Instead of accepting responsibility for his employee, however, he blankly denies any affiliation with the scrivener. Interestingly, this denial is threefold in form: His assertions "the man you allude to is nothing to me" and "I know nothing about him" (34) are followed by his remark "I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me" (35). The reference to the three Petrine denials of Jesus[18] quite intriguingly combines the lawyer's internal conflict with the deliberately artificial presentation of Bartleby described earlier. Unlike the reference to the Colt/Adams case, however, the denials of Bartleby are not accompanied by any comments that would indicate that the lawyer is aware of the self-damaging implications of his biblical allusion. Yet given his repeated use of threefold structures in his description of Bartleby, it is unlikely that he did not intend his denials to be evocative of the betrayal of Jesus. The only possibility that is left is that the narrator is in fact aware of his self-indictment, but for some reason prefers not to expatiate upon it.

The denial of Bartleby is also significant in that it denotes the decisive influence that social factors play in the lawyer's final incapability to adhere to the

[18] Cf. Donald M. Fiene, "Bartleby the Christ". *American Transcendental Quarterly* 7 (1970): 18-23.

doctrine of Christian charitableness. The fact that the three denials of Bartleby occur in response to insisting demands from colleagues of the lawyer's suggests that the presence of professional friends activates the reasonable fractions of the lawyer's mind. Remarks such as "I believe that this wise and blessed [i.e. Christian] frame of mind would have continued with me had it not been for the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon me by my professional friends" (31) and "as … my friends continually intruded their relentless remarks upon the apparition in my room, a great change was wrought in me" (32) demonstrate that the lawyer himself is aware of the determinative influence exerted by his social environment. Again, the lawyer's psychological configuration becomes manifest in his accounts of his interactions with other characters of the story. In the case of the Wall Street man's professional friends, the functional nature of these interactions is quite obvious, considering the indistinct reference that the narrator makes to "this torrent" (35) of people. What is maybe less obvious is the fact that the intrusion of societal norms does not begin when, almost at the end of the story, that "perturbed looking stranger" (34) visits the lawyer. Turkey and Nippers, whom the narrator takes care to introduce at the beginning of his narrative and who decline in importance as the story proceeds, fulfill exactly the same function. When Bartleby first refuses to examine the copies of a legal document, the lawyer "begins … vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side" (13). He immediately turns to his clerks "for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind" (13) and is glad to find his demand confirmed. When Bartleby again refuses to examine copies, the lawyer's reaction is exactly the same; he turns to his clerks for advice: "What do you think of it, Turkey? … What do you think of it, Nippers?" (16). In both cases, the narrator highlights the clerks' functional nature by evoking their gradually changing moods ("Nippers's ugly mood was on duty, and Turkey's off" (14)). The decisive difference is that in his interactions with Turkey and Nippers the lawyer is capable of controlling the forces they represent and using them to his advantage. When social pressure returns in the form of fellow lawyers and office tenants, the lawyer is not its beneficiary, but its victim. He fears for his reputation – his social existence, so to say – and feels compelled to comply with his colleagues' demands.

Again, the degree to which the lawyer is conscious of this parallel between his clerks and his professional friends remains disputable. While he is certainly aware of the crucial influence of his colleagues on his decision to leave Bartleby, he makes no explicit mention of the social dimension of Turkey and Nippers. Uncertainties of this kind have generated a large body of critical debate concerning the exact nature of the lawyer's state of mind, his sense of responsibility and his culpability at the end of his narrative. For a reconsideration of this question it may be worthwhile to take a closer look at the lawyer's final encounter with Bartleby. Standing in front of the dead scrivener, the lawyer famously murmurs "With kings and counsellors". That the phrase is from the book of Job is clear. That it is not merely a superficial or sanctimonious reference to the Bible becomes clear by looking at the larger context of the quotation (Job 3). The immediate context presents some intriguing details which suggest that the passage was not chosen at random. Job, cursing the day of his birth, asks "why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?" (3:11); the lawyer stands before Bartleby, the "ghost", who has just done that – given up the ghost. Job wishes he had died "from the womb" (3:11); the lawyer describes Bartleby lying on the ground in a fetal position. Job imagines his death as a kind of sleep ("I should have slept: then had I been at rest" (3:13)); the lawyer remarks that Bartleby "seemed profoundly sleeping" (40). These analogies would suggest that Bartleby is Job. Yet Job's wish to rest with "princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver" (3:15) is much less reminiscent of Bartleby than of the lawyer, who early in the story professes that he likes the name of John Jacob Astor because it "rings like unto bullion" (4). Taking this resemblance into account, one can hypothesize that the biblical reference – like so many before – is used to examine the lawyer's own self. Support for this hypothesis comes from another reference the narrator makes to the book of Job. When the lawyer first visits Bartleby in prison he fancies he sees "the eyes of murderers and thieves" (38) peering at the scrivener. This remark is strangely damaging to the lawyer's later attempt to convince Bartleby that the Tombs "is not so sad a place as one might think" (38). Like the oblivious Amasa Delano of "Benito Cereno", he turns to nature for consolation: "Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass" (38). Unlike Delano, however, he seems to be aware of the questionableness of his own behavior. In the book of Job, it is Job himself who talks about the wicked man –

the "murderer" and "thief" (24:14) – who "remove[s] the landmarks" (24:2), "turn[s] the needy out of the way" (4) and "cause[s] the naked to lodge without clothing, that they have no covering in the cold" (7). Interestingly, one of his friends accuses Job of very similar misdeeds: "For thou hast … stripped the naked of their clothing. Thou hast not given water to the weary to drink, and thou hast withholden bread from the hungry" (22:6-8). Do these accusations not also pertain to the lawyer, who – apart from being involved in foreclosures – abandons his miserable employee although he realizes that "he eats nothing but ginger-nuts" (15) and although he has seen him "in his shirt sleeves, and otherwise in a strangely tattered dishabille" (19) and although he knows that he has nowhere to go? These resemblances are not the only ones; many of the topics which are central to Job's story are also relevant to the lawyer and his experiences with Bartleby: the inanity of human existence, which unites rich and poor (3:19; 4:19-21; 21:23-6; 34:18-20), the impossibility – even for those who believe themselves to be righteous – to live without sin (4:17-8; 15:16; 33:26-7) and the punishment of those who do not live according to God's commandments (18:5-21; 20:4-29; 24:18-25). If the narrator is familiar with the main tenets of the book of Job – and his reference to murderers and thieves suggests he is – the final words he directs at Bartleby indicate that he is aware of his moral deficiency as a person – he understands that unlike Job he is not "perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (1:1) – and maybe of his guilt in the particular case of Bartleby. It is also true, however, that the allusion to the book of Job is rather cautious and that the lawyer does not end his story by explicitly stating his guilt.

By way of conclusion, it has to be admitted that, after all that has been said, no definite judgment concerning the lawyer's culpability can be reached. It is truly paradoxical that although the first-person narrator offers us extensive access to his thoughts we find it so difficult to either condemn or absolve him. What, then, is the contribution a narrator-focused approach can make to an understanding of "Bartleby"? The answer is that it allows us to judge the lawyer not only on the basis of his behavior towards Bartleby, but on the basis of his "narrative behavior". From this point of view, the simple fact that the narrator is a first-person narrator would suggest that by allowing the lawyer to argue his own case Melville consciously refused to include a more clearly accusatory third-

person voice. Similarly, the fact that the lawyer has decided to tell his story at all can be taken as proof that his experiences with the scrivener still haunt him. The lawyer's constant oscillation between leniency and relentlessness and his consistent use of Christian and classical imagery suggest that he is aware of two different philosophic viewpoints and two options for action that are available to him. His final – Christian – reference to the book of Job can then be taken to be indicative of his abandonment of the Ciceronian viewpoint and his retrospective regret at not having abandoned it earlier. Yet if this final turn in the lawyer's attitude is apt to win the sympathies of readers, it also presents the main problem that must keep readers from a plenary absolution of the lawyer, which is his lack of consciousness. There is a stark discrepancy between the lawyer's extremely elaborate narrative, which can very sensibly be read as a pertinent and skilful self-examination, and the lawyer's apparent unawareness of what he is doing. There is simply no indication in the text that shows the lawyer to be truly conscious of the self-reflexive nature of his "biography". If we assume that Melville did not simply chose the wrong point of view and that he takes his narrator seriously, this could ultimately be read as a supreme instance of irony – presenting a narrator who creates what may well be Melville's most intricate piece of writing, but who does not understand what he is doing, and consequently falls short of a complete understanding and avowal of his own misdeeds.

3. "Benito Cereno" – Why moralize upon it?

3.1. The hostile narrator

The differences between "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno" – both in terms of topics and narrative technique – are numerous. The most fundamental difference, however, can quite succinctly be described by comparing no more than two aspects: the "source" of the narrative and the point of view that is used. In "Bartleby" the whole story is told by a first-person narrator who insists that no original sources are available for a verification of what he says. If it is difficult to judge the narrator, this is because readers entirely depend on the information that

he himself provides. In "Benito Cereno", the situation is completely different. The narrator deliberately includes extracts of a supposedly authentic document, which is Benito Cereno's deposition in the trial against the slaves of the San Dominick. For the rest of the story, the narrator assumes a limited point of view and relates the events on board the slave ship as seen through the eyes of its captain Amasa Delano. This narrative configuration contains the very essence of the narrator's intentions in telling his story. The deposition, which the narrator purposely places after the main part of the narrative, seems not only to "reveal the … true history of the San Dominick's voyage" (232); it is intended to devalue Delano's ethnocentric point of view and attack his belief in the supremacy of the white race. And the reader is not spared either. During the first part of the story, he is made to follow Delano's every move; he participates in his reflections and shares his perception of the events on board the San Dominick. Then, all of a sudden, the captain's perceptions are shown to be wrong and the opposite of everything he assumed to be true is revealed as the real truth. Seen from this perspective, the limited point of view that the narrator adopts appears as the only logical choice because it allows him to combine the advantages of first person and third person narration and use them for his purposes. He comes close to a first person narrator in that he offers the reader the subjective experiences of one particular character of the story. Unlike a first person narrator, however, he is free occasionally to assume the role of an omniscient and intrusive narrator who comments on the story he tells in general and on the main character of this story in particular.

Examples of both kinds of commentary can be found at the beginning of the story. The third paragraph contains the well-known description of the morning on which the San Dominick is first sighted. As Roberta Craven rightly observes,[19] the paragraph introduces a threefold structure which is directly opposed to the binary confrontation of a black and a white race and also to the oscillation between confidence and distrust concerning Benito Cereno, which defines Delano's behavior during his stay on the San Dominick. All three elements that are presented are associated with the color gray: the sea, which "was sleeked at the surface like waved lead" (164), the sky, which "seemed a gray surtout" (164)

[19] Roberta Jill Craven, "Melville's Signifyin(g) Shadows: The Mutiny of Form in Melville's 'Benito Cereno'". *Short Story* 9.2 (2001): 81-93; here: 86.

and the “gray fowl” and “gray vapors”, which “skimmed low and fitfully over the waters” (164). The picture that emerges contains two solid, or “fixed” (164), elements – the sky and the sea – and one mobile element, which is made up of two components – birds and vapors. The narrator emphasizes that it is impossible to discern the two components of the mobile element: The birds are not only “kith and kin”, but also “mixed” (164) with the vapors; both birds and vapors are described as “gray” and “troubled” (164), and they are both referred to as “flights” (164). This complex image quite unambiguously problematizes the veracity of human perceptions, and Delano’s failure to perceive the situation on board the San Dominick correctly can be considered an extended illustration of this problem. Towards the end of the paragraph, however, the problem of perception is increasingly clouded. The birds are now presented as harbingers of turmoil. First they are “as swallows over meadows before storms” (154), then they are interpreted as “[s]hadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come”. This last sentence still contains a threefold pattern consisting of two “solid” elements – the nouns “shadows” and “deeper shadows” – and one mobile element – the participle “foreshadowing” –, but the idea of grayness and indistinctness has disappeared. Before continuing his narrative, the narrator carefully directs the associations of readers away from Delano the incompetent spectator, towards Delano the victim of somber and fateful events that are to happen as the story continues.

The second instance of narrative intrusion is only one paragraph away. In the fourth paragraph, the narrator remarks that Delano is “a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated excitement, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man” (164). This sentence defines the most important aspect of the American captain’s character and prospectively describes his reaction towards the “extraordinary and repeated excitement” caused by Benito Cereno: oscillating between “personal alarms” concerning the Spaniard’s supposedly evil schemes and reassuring himself that nothing evil could ever happen to him. Immediately following this sentence, the narrator offers his most explicitly negative evaluation of the American: “Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and

accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine" (164). This sentence explicitly challenges Captain Delano's capacity for adequate cognitive perception – a challenge which the following narrative will show to be all too well-founded. Yet the narrator takes care to word his criticism in a way that is apt to downplay its own importance. The use of an indirect question and a modal verb is complemented by the sympathetic assertion that Delano has a "benevolent heart". And even the criticism of his perception is not as harsh as it may seem. After all, if it is not exceptional, it is still "ordinary", and thus not below the level that one may reasonably expect in a human being. This combination of criticism and defense is typical of the narrator's strategy. Formally, the sentence contains no more than a mild attack. From a narrative point of view, however, it is clear hat the narrator chooses to include this attack for the purpose of casting doubt on Delano and his ostentatious self-assuredness.

This subtly hostile strategy also pertains to the reader. It is no coincidence that the two most readily perceivable instances of narrator intrusion occur within the first four paragraphs. For the rest of the story, the reader is made to follow the American captain's thoughts and actions, which inevitably causes the narrator's initial remarks to be relegated to the background. While the limited point of view of the narrative makes it easy for readers to forget certain pieces of information that question the main character's perceptual ability, the narrator does not quite let them off the hook. The color gray is mentioned two more times, once in describing the oakum-pickers, whose function on board the San Dominick Delano does not understand ("gray-headed bag-pipers" (168)), and once in a sentence which conspicuously recalls the narrator's earlier use of the color to express the difficulty of accurate perception ("It was now about noon, though, from the grayness of everything, it seemed to be getting towards dusk" (202)). The adjective "leaden", reminiscent of the "waved lead" of the third paragraph, is used three more times, in all cases referring to the color of the ocean. The first instance is particularly similar to the initial birds and vapors scene in that it combines the "leaden-hued swells" of the ocean and the "shreds of fog" (166) surrounding the Spanish ship. The second instance – "the leaden calm" (182) – is placed between the tolling of the forecastle bell, which is struck by one of the oakum-pickers, and the first appearance of the chained Atufal. Again, the grayness of the lead seems

to hint at Delano's – and the reader's – inability to understand the spectacle that is being staged around him, including the oakum pickers, who, unbeknownst to Delano, serve as a kind of police force, and Atufal, who can cast off his chains at any moment. The third and last use of the adjective "leaden" confirms this interpretation. The narrator contrasts the appearance of the "leaden ocean", which "seemed laid out and leaded up" (202), and the reality that is hidden beneath this appearance: "But the current from landward … increased; silently sweeping her further and further towards the tranced waters beyond" (202). Just as the fixity of the leaden ocean is but an illusion, the narrator seems to be saying, so the apparent fixity of power relations is but a delusion which distracts the American captain from the "sweeping" changes that have taken place in the hierarchy of blacks and whites on board the Spanish vessel.

As these examples show, the narrator reverts to his initial attacks on the American captain's perception several times. However, once Delano sets foot on the Spanish ship the number of such allusions remains quite small and there is no explicitly worded criticism of the kind of the "may be left to the wise to determine" segment. For most of the time, the narrator lets the reader go along with Delano and does not provide any hints that would alert him to the actual state of affairs on board the slave ship. Or rather, he does not provide hints that – on first reading the story – would suffice to alert the reader. On a second reading there is a huge number of discreet hints that a reader who already knows the outcome of the story will notice. This narrative technique creates two distinct reading experiences: a first reading during which the reader might suspect that something is going on, but still sticks with Delano as he wanders through the maze of the San Dominick, and a second reading during which the reader, now possessing an informational edge over the American, will inevitably turn on Delano for not realizing what is going on. Remembering his own first reading, however, the reader will also be forced to turn upon himself for having allowed the narrator to delude him. An important aspect that contributes to the success of this strategy is the way in which the narrator discloses not only his evaluation of Delano but also his fashioning of the narrative. Unlike the lawyer in "Bartleby", who at the beginning of his story gives at least a slight hint that he has deliberately chosen a particular layout for his story, the narrator of "Benito Cereno" starts his

story as if it were a conventional adventure story. First, the time and place of the action, as well as the main character, are quickly introduced. Then, at the beginning of the second paragraph, the plot immediately starts off with the appearance of "a strange sail" (164). Evidence of a purposeful structuring of the narrative is withheld until the very end when, after the recapture of the San Dominick, the scenic mode of narration which has been used until this point is abandoned in favor of a panoramic mode. Now the narrator explicitly summarizes events, such as the voyage to Lima (231), includes supposedly authentic material, comments on its function in relation to the story that he has just told ("the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it" (244)) and remarks upon the reaction of the Lima court to Benito Cereno's deposition. Throughout the deposition, the frequent omissions and summarizing remarks, which are set off from the original document by the use of square brackets and italic type, remind the reader of the narrator's conscious manipulation of his source material. Before the final segment of the narrative the narrator attests to this manipulation by saying that "the nature of this narrative, besides rendering the intricacies in the beginning unavoidable, has more or less required that many things, instead of being set down in the order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given" (244). This claim is very similar to the lawyer's claim that his introductory remarks are indispensable to an understanding of Bartleby. And as in the case of the lawyer, the reader wonders what exactly it is in the "nature" of the narrative that requires a departure from a strictly chronological account of the events on board the San Dominick. After all, what objective reason is there for the narrator not to bear out the "straight adventure story" promise of his initial paragraphs and simply tell the story from beginning to end? The answer can only be that the narrator uses the structure of "Benito Cereno" to condemn Delano for his racially biased blindness and the reader for his inadvertent complicity.

3.2. The deposition and the narrative – "the key to fit into the lock"?

On the basis of the assumption developed in the preceding chapter, it would seem that a more detailed idea of the narrator's efforts to damage the American captain can be developed by identifying elements that occur in the deposition and in the

preceding narrative, analyzing the different ways in which they are used in the two parts of the story and determining the effect that these differences have on the reader's evaluation of Captain Delano. A comparable procedure can be applied to elements that play an important role in one part of the narrative, but are absent in the other part.

The first and most important element concerns the different groups of slaves and the role they play in the rebellion on board the San Dominick. At the beginning of the deposition (233), the narrator takes care to include those slaves in his list whose role is elaborated upon in the rest of the deposition and in the narrative itself: Francesco, the oakum-pickers, the hatchet-polishers, Atufal, Babo and the women with their children. All other slaves, except for José and Dago, are omitted. The narrator is also very careful to include pieces of information about the slaves that highlight Delano's inability to see reality. Concerning Francesco, for example, we learn that he is "of a good … voice, having sung in the Valparaiso churches" (233). This reminds us of Delano's remark, "What a pleasant voice he has, too?" (215). Later in the deposition we learn that "the mulatto steward, Francesco, was of the first band of revolters" (241) and that he intended to poison Captain Delano's food. The American is far from surmising as much because he is deceived by the steward's exterior appearance. From the mulatto's fancy dress ("a pagoda turban"), his complexion and features ("the complexion of the mulatto was hybrid, his physiognomy was European" (214)) and his submissive gestures Delano deduces that he must needs be "the king of kind hearts and polite fellows" (215). Delano also sees the mulatto as proof that the intermixture of "white" blood in African blood improves the latter's quality (215). He is so obsessed with his idea of white superiority that he even assumes Babo, the "purebred" African, to feel inferior to Francesco ("his jealous watchfulness … which the full-blooded African entertains for the adulterated one" (214)). A very similar pattern applies to the oakum-pickers and hatchet polishers. The deposition tells us that "Babo appointed the four aged Negroes … to keep what domestic order they could on the decks" and that "he stationed [the Ashantees] on the break of the poop, as if to clean certain hatchets … but in reality to use them, and distribute them … at a given word he told them" (238). While Delano does realize that the old slaves' role is to maintain some order on

board the ship, the words he uses to refer to them show that he has no idea that they are part of an elaborate scheme that serves to delude him. To Delano, the oakum-pickers are either "old dominies" (180), "bed-ridden old knitting women" (192) or "gray-headed bag-pipers" (168). All terms betray the captain's tendency to seek a familiar image from his own experience and cultural background that can be obtruded on the black slaves and their activities. In the case of the hatchet-polishers, this tendency is even more pronounced. Delano compares them to "scullion[s]" (169), "organ-grinders" (179), "tailors" (204) and "scissors-grinders" (191). Even his less domestic designations – "conjurors" (181) and "black wizards" (189) – do not seem to convey a genuine sense of fear or apprehension.

Interestingly, Delano's use of familiarizing metaphors is not restricted to his references to the oakum-pickers and hatchet-polishers. In fact, it is one of the features that is most characteristic of the American's reflections throughout the narrative. The origin of Delano's obsessive and continual "familiarizing" can be identified by looking at the passages in which the word "familiar" – or other words from the same word family – is used. A comparison of the most important examples clearly indicates that the American captain "imports" his need for a familiar environment from his own ship ("the quiet orderliness of the sealer's comfortable family of a crew" (173)) to the mysterious Spanish ship, where – so he thinks – the relation between blacks and whites is indicative of a certain "familiarity" (171, 184, 185, 209). The metaphors Delano uses are but a logical consequence and elaboration of this basic misconception. They refer to the San Dominick ("some eccentric bachelor-squire in the country" (207)), Babo's supposed concern for his master ("smoothing the hair along the temples as a nurse does a child's" (218)), the Spanish sailors ("reconnoitering from a port-hole like a fox from the mouth of its den" (198)) and the other black slaves ("a social circle of bats" (205), "a slumbering negress … like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock" (196)). What is interesting about these metaphors is that in many cases they combine an effort to create a harmless, familiar scene with the use of animal imagery. They also show that this combination is not peculiar to Delano's conception of blacks, but that it is characteristic of his perception of the exterior world in general, which relies on the application of preconceived patterns to

unfamiliar or inexplicable phenomena. In the case of the blacks, however, the particularly frequent use of animal images indicates that his belief in the anthropological inferiority of blacks also plays an important role. It is probably an indefinite blend of both factors that leads Delano to his assumption that the black slaves of the San Dominick are "too stupid" (199) to design a plot against him. This basic assumption, which informs all of Delano's misconceptions of the events on board the San Dominick, is exploited by Babo, who conceives devices which speak to Delano's racial bias and his need for "familiarity".

The most prominent device of his kind – in addition to the oakum-pickers and the hatchet-polishers – is the staging of the chained Atufal's plea for Benito Cereno's mercy. It never occurs to Delano that, as the deposition tells us, "in a moment the chains could be dropped" (238). He is successfully lulled into the belief that Captain Cereno's command of the ship has remained uninfringed. The sense of Delano's delusion is aggravated by his own words, which hint at the truth that he himself does not perceive. He humorously urges the Spanish captain to "take a fool's advice" (184) and remit Atufal's penalty. He also thinks he divines the meaning behind the padlock of Atufal's chains and the key around Cereno's neck: "So, Don Benito – padlock and key – significant symbols, truly" (184). Yet both utterances only highlight the fact that Delano is indeed a "fool" and that he does not understand the symbolic nature of the chained Atufal figure.

The success of such devices as Atufal's fake chains depends on their careful planning by Babo, the "plotter" of the slaves' revolt (241). Delano's perception of the black, which is of course wholly incongruous with reality, confirms the American's proneness to the deceptions of exterior appearance. When "in quest of whomsoever it might be that commanded the ship" (169) he first sees the captain and his supposed slave, he is confronted with two figures who display a marked contrast in physical appearance. While Delano is "dressed with singular richness", Babo is "of small stature" and has a "rude face" (169). This contrast is even more evident in a later scene (177) where the American's "loose Chili jacket of dark velvet", his "high-crowned sombrero" and "slender sword, silver mounted" are described at length and contrasted with Babo's "wide trowsers … made out of some old topsail". As the narrator explicitly tells us, it is

"the contrast in dress, denoting their relative positions" that confirms the American's initial conception of the master-slave relation between Cereno and Babo. The American captain's spontaneous admiration of "the beauty of that relationship" is due to his racially conditioned mind, which automatically associates blacks with the servant role and whites with the master role. Because of his racial bias Delano finds a hierarchical relationship "beautiful" which, if the power relation were to be reversed, he would most certainly find repelling.[20] The narrator rather subtly hints at this arbitrary and biased distribution of roles. If his sentence "As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white …" is taken to be a parallel construction, it associates "master" with "black" and "man" with "white". If it is a chiasmus, it highlights the artificial assignment of superiority and inferiority in the power relation between blacks and whites. In addition to this structural point, the choice of the word "man" breaks up the conventional opposition of master and slave and underlines that no matter who is identified as the "master", both Babo and Cereno are "men", i.e. human beings. A less subtle hint at the arbitrary and changing distribution of roles can be found in the description of the San Dominick's stern-piece, which is one of the elements that do not figure in the deposition and that the narrator thus seems to have added to the narrative on his own accord. As in previous cases, the word "device" is used to alert readers to the hidden meaning of the "symbolical devices" that are presented. And as in the chained Atufal scene there is no indication that Delano understands the purport of what is before his eyes. What the narrator – and Melville – wants readers to understand from the stern-piece device has very convincingly been shown by Daniel Göske, who argues that the inspiration for the "dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (167) comes from Anna Jameson's description of Raphael's painting "St. Michael and the Dragon".[21] This painting illustrates the traditional theme of the fiendish satyr thrust down by an angel of God. While the stern-piece thus reverses the traditional power relation between good and evil, it also insists that the epithets "good" and "evil" cannot permanently be attached to either party. Even if we take the "dark satyr" to stand for the black "race", the fact remains that

[20] Cf. Adler, "Slavery and Violence in the Americas", 83-84.
[21] Daniel Göske, "Dark Satyrs, White Enthusiasts: Hawthorne's and Melville's Variations on 'St. Michael and the Dragon'". *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 54.2-3 (1993): 207-24.

the narrator takes care to emphasize that both figures are alike in that they wear masks. These masks seem to be another device that the narrator uses in order to show that moral categories are not essential to particular groups of people, but that they can, and indeed often have been, put on and off by any part of mankind that one cares to name. This quite far-reaching interpretation is supported by the narrator's explicit reversal of roles in the scene in which Delano prevents Babo from stabbing his master. By using two of the words that are central to the description of the stern-piece – "prostrate" and "writhe up" – the narrator makes it clear that it is now Delano who plays the part of the "dark satyr". His foot is shown to "ground the prostrate negro", who, on his part, is "snakishly writhing up from the boat's bottom" (227).

This interchangeability of roles ultimately suggests that there are no inherent differences between members of the human species. The narrator seems to encourage readers to adopt this view by emphasizing one detail of the deposition which otherwise would not command much attention. The deposition tells us that "on the fifth day of the calm, all on board suffering much from the heat, and want of water, and five having died in fits, and mad, the negroes became irritable" (237). This sentence underlines the common experience of suffering on board the ship and remains strangely ambiguous about whether the men who died were white or black. This idea of community in suffering is very conspicuously foregrounded by the narrator in the scene in which Captain Delano enters the Spanish slave ship: "Climbing the side, the visitor was at once surrounded by a clamorous throng of whites and blacks … But, in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering" (167). Following this description, which emphasizes the oneness of blacks and whites, an extended series of third person pronouns – "they" and "their" are used six times – continues the idea of the common and unifying experience of human frailty. As the story proceeds, the narrator includes several scenes in which black slaves and white sailors are shown to be engaged in a common task. The first such scene includes a "sailor seated on the deck engaged in tarring the strap of a large block" (194). He is surrounded by blacks, one of whom holds his tar pot. What is interesting about this scene is that the white sailor blackens his hand in the process of tarring, which makes him more like the blacks around him. Delano's moralizing remarks ("…

that man there has fouled his hand in [wickedness]" (195)) must thus be taken to refer to blacks and whites alike. This idea of a common entanglement of blacks and whites in immorality is even more obvious in a later scene (199) which features a sailor whose "hands were full of ropes, which he was working into a large knot". Again, whites and blacks share in the task that is described: "Some blacks were about him obligingly dipping the strands for him". As in previous scenes, the narrator indicates that Delano comes very close to understanding the meaning of the scene, but in the end remains ignorant. To him the knotter "looked like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon". The evocation of the Gordian knot clearly serves to highlight the intricacy of the sailor's knot, but it also refers to the "Alexandrian solution", i.e. the use of force to undo the knot. Interestingly, this is exactly what the sailor who makes the knot urges Delano to do: "Undo it, cut it, quick" (200). If we apply this extended allusion to the relation between whites and blacks on the San Dominick it seems to suggest that they are so tightly "knotted together" by their common humanity that only the use of force can separate them into different groups and arbitrarily assign an inferior, or even "evil", role to one of them.

All the elements that have just been cited clearly show that the narrator provides the reader with a sufficient number of cues to allow him to understand – at least on a second reading – that the "Benito Cereno" narrative refutes the idea of the inferiority of the black "race", which is so obvious to Delano, and also disproves the supposed viciousness of the black slaves, which some critics have taken for granted.[22] It is also true, however, that the narrator's commitment to the refusal of these ideas is not always equally apparent. One scene which has been cited as proof that the narrator shares Delano's racism presents blacks as "natural valets and hair-dressers" and praises their "docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind" (209). Although there is no clear sign that this view is only the narrator's rendering of Delano's racial bias, there are some indications that the narrator is distancing himself from his focalizer-protagonist. First of all, the narrator's remarks are part of a scene that shows Delano "looking

[22] See, for example, Sidney Kaplan, "Herman Melville and the American National Sin: The Meaning of 'Benito Cereno'". *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Benito Cereno. Ed. Robert. E. Burkholder. New York: Hall, 1992. 37-47.

round" (208) the cuddy of the San Dominick. Hence, it can be argued that it is the American's impression of everything he sees that the narrator reports to the reader. The narrator seems to confirm this interpretation of his role by ending his supposedly racist remarks with a description of the clearly racist Delano, who "took to Negroes … genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (209). The focus on Delano is maintained by the remark that "all his old weakness for negroes returned" (209), which suggests that the views expressed earlier are a reflection of the American's thoughts, but not the narrator's. The statement about Delano's peculiar "weakness" for the black "race" also reminds us that the narrator's remarks about the nature of this "race" are made at the beginning of the shaving scene, which is a supreme example of Babo's mental capacities and the way he uses them to outwit the supposedly superior American. The narrator is necessarily aware of this fact, but chooses to delay the revelation of Babo's scheming in order to restrict the reader's insight to the perceptive horizon of captain Delano. In the context of this general narrative tactic, which serves to extend the critique of Delano to the reader, the narrator's apparently racist remarks can only be taken to mirror the American captain's undoubtedly racist thinking. A hint of a more formal nature which confirms this view comes from the conditional clause "But if there be that in the negro which exempts him from the inflicted sourness of the morbid or cynical mind …" (209), which calls into question the accuracy of the condition that it expresses.

That the narrator's own stance is really more unbiased than Delano's becomes clear as soon as his presence is physically removed from the American captain. Throughout the first part of the narrative, the narrator follows Delano very closely. At the end of the first segment, however, the narrator abandons Delano and follows the chief mate of the Bachelor's Delight in his attempt to recapture the San Dominick. This passage, unlike the previous ones, is defined by a striking symmetry in the description of blacks and whites. The shots of the whites' "muskets" are answered by the blacks' "yells"; at the "second volley" of the whites the blacks "hurtled their hatchets", one of them "remaining stuck in the gunwale". The hatchet is returned and "now stuck in the ship's broken quarter-gallery" (229). A similarly symmetric arrangement is found in the sentence "Sealing-spears and cutlasses crossed hatchets and hand-spikes" (230), in which

the narrator explicitly evokes a chiasmus-like form by the use of the verb "cross". When the white sailors finally take the ship, they are described as "submerged sword-fish rushing … through shoals of black-fish" (231). It is interesting that in this crucial moment the narrator, who is now independent of Delano, uses animal imagery to refer to both blacks and whites. Somewhat less obviously, the same phenomenon is observable in the description of the defeated blacks ("Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths" (231)), which is immediately followed by a similar description of the sailors ("But the pale sailors' teeth were set" (231)). The deposition, which like the final part of the narrative is detached from Delano's biased point of view, adds two more scenes that highlight the basic sameness of blacks and whites. The first one shows a white sailor "who, having found a razor in the pocket of an old jacket of his, which one of the shackled negroes had on, was aiming it at the negro's throat". In the second scene, Delano takes from "Bartholomew Barlo a dagger, secreted at the time of the massacre of the whites, with which he was in the act of stabbing a shackled negro, who, the same day, with another negro, had thrown him down and jumped upon him" (243). Both examples emphasize the constant to-and-fro between superiority and inferiority of blacks and whites. They also show that in essence black slaves and white sailors are driven by the same impulse. Once they have gained control over their former masters, they take revenge and become guilty of the same atrocities that they suffered from when their opponents were in control.

Concluding this chapter, one formal aspect which underlines the falseness of Captain Delano's biased view deserves closer consideration. In the deposition, the use of indirect speech – and the concomitantly high frequency of the subordinator "that" – constantly reminds readers that they are presented with a subjective account that does not come from the narrator himself. A comparable mechanism is used in the preceding narrative, where the narrator uses an abundant number of "like" and "as if" constructions. They are so numerous that it would be impossible to cite all of them. Suffice it to say that they are always used to describe Delano's perception of the San Dominick, its captain and the black slaves and that they always serve to illustrate the American's misconceptions. A very obvious example is Delano's impression that Babo follows his master and keeps "his eye fixed on his face, as if to watch for the first sign of complete

restoration" (175). The American's "as if" interpretation is later corrected by the deposition, which tells us that what is behind this "appearance of submission is Babo's intention to "observe the deponent's actions and words" (239). Interestingly, the deposition is not only the corrective of Delano's as-ifs, it also seems to be their source. The narrator apparently imitates expressions he finds in the deposition, such as "them he stationed on the break of the poop, as if to clean certain hatchets" (238), and uses them in his narrative to attack the American's – and the reader's – inability to understand that what he sees is but a distorted version of reality. The only section in which the narrator uses no such qualifying narrative constructions is the final segment following the deposition. It is no coincidence, therefore, that this segment contains the most overt criticism of Captain Delano and his ignorant mindset. While the Spanish captain has been deeply affected by the events he was forced to witness on his own ship, Captain Delano prefers to forget everything that has happened: "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" (246). Benito Cereno, who accuses his American colleague of his blindness, understands very well that Delano has not been affected at all by what has happened. The American's advice to forget everything and his unwillingness to consider possible moral consequences of the events he has been involved in leave no doubt that his blindness and ignorance remain undiminished at the end of the narrative. In this context, the importance of the Spaniard's reply "Because they have no memory … because they are not human" (246) cannot be underestimated. By including this conversation, which is only one among many, supposedly "cordial", conversations, the narrator not only shows that his focalizer-protagonist remains in a state of willful blindness, but also makes the point that by doing so he reveals his "unhuman" nature. There is a particularly damaging irony in this message, of course, considering that throughout the narrative it is Delano who denies the blacks the status of human beings.

3.3. Christian (and classical) imagery

While the narrative organization of "Benito Cereno" clearly condemns Captain Delano's racial bias, the imagery that the narrator uses equally clearly condemns the institution of slavery, which is the natural result of racism. Since in "Benito Cereno" it is the Spanish ship that carries the slaves, the criticism contained in the story's metaphors is exclusively leveled at the Spanish Empire, complementing, as it were, the criticism of the United States that is inherent in the narrator's portrayal of the American captain. This complementary function is most obvious in the careful selection of the metaphors that are used. Unlike his "colleagues" in "Bartleby" and *Billy Budd*, the narrator of "Benito Cereno" does not use any metaphors from the domain of Greco-Roman antiquity. The only metaphors that could be counted as "classical" have an explicitly "Egyptian" character: the "sphynx-like" oakum-pickers (168), the knotter who looks like "an Egyptian priest" (199), Atufal, the "bull of the Nile" (203), who looks "like one of those sculptured porters of black marble guarding the porches of Egyptian tombs" (218), and of course Babo, who "seemed a Nubian sculptor" (213). What all these examples have in common is that they reflect the American's perception of the black slaves he sees on board the San Dominick. As Allan M. Emery[23] has pointed out, the reference to Egypt – and to Nubia in particular – is evocative of a debate about the original unity of the human race which was raging at the time of the publication of "Benito Cereno". Emery mentions Josiah Nott's and George Gliddon's *Types of Mankind*, which made use of archeological "evidence" from Egypt in order to confirm the supposedly natural separation of races. Emery also notes, however, that other publications that appeared during the 1840s and 1850s contested Nott's and Gliddon's conclusions, insisting instead on the unity of races and their common origin in Adam. Given the narrative configuration of "Benito Cereno", Emery is certainly right in concluding that Melville did not side with the separateness of races fraction. It is very likely, therefore, that the narrator of his story uses the Egyptian imagery in an effort to denounce Delano's racist ideas about the existence of a black "species", which are most obviously evinced in his reflections on Cereno's being "so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very

[23] Emery, "The Topicality of Depravity", 323-24.

species" (199). The narrator presents Delano's perceptions not because they are in accord with his own beliefs, but because he uses them to turn against the American – and readers who fail to realize that Delano's conception of what he sees is not to be accepted as the incontestable truth.

In addition to the restricted number of classical images, the narrator uses a certain number of explicitly Christian metaphors, which, even more clearly than the allusions just mentioned, refer to historical events and personages. As many scholars have noted, the selection of these references is such that they complement each other and form a complex representation of the role that the Christian Church played in the establishment of the slave trade in the Americas.[24] The most important element in this complex metaphor is the Spanish slave ship, the San Dominick. The ship's name, which is one of the narrator's most obvious modifications of his source document, is a straightforward allusion to the island of Santo Domingo, which was discovered by Columbus – the San Dominick's original figurehead (236) – and soon became one of the first centers of the importation of slaves in the New World. The Catholic Church – and the monastic order of the Dominicans in particular – played an important role in the propagation of the large-scale exportation of African slaves into the New World. The Spanish crown, on the other hand, was not unresponsive to the idea of replacing the increasingly diminished indigenous population of its overseas colonies with imported black slaves. Two of the most notable figures in this enterprise were Charles the Fifth of Spain and Bartholomew de Las Casas, a Dominican priest who apparently convinced the Spanish king to legalize the exportation of slaves to Santo Domingo. It is certainly no coincidence that the narrator chooses to include references to both the worldly and the clerical champion of slavery in his narrative. Not only does the San Dominick look "like a white-washed monastery", it also contains "a ship-load of monks", "throngs of dark cowls" and "other dark moving figures … as of Black Friars pacing the cloisters" (166). This explicit reference to the Dominicans – "Black Friar" being a conventional synonym of "Dominican" – is in line with Delano's perception that

[24] Cf. Gloria Horsley-Meacham, "The Monastic Slaver: Images and Meaning in 'Benito Cereno'". *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Benito Cereno. Ed. Robert. E. Burkholder. New York: Hall, 1992. 94-98 and Charles Berryman, "'Benito Cereno' and the Black Friars". *Studies in American Fiction* 18.2 (1990): 159-70.

Captain Cereno, who is the apparent leader of the friars, resembles Charles the Fifth of Spain (172). The Spanish king's advisor Las Casas is also referred to in the story. Towards the end of the deposition, we are told that the name of one of the sailors who took revenge on the black slaves after the conquest of the San Dominick is Bartholomew Barlo (243). In the final segment of the story, which is detached from Delano's point of view, the narrator explains that the remains of the killed slaveholder Aranda were buried in "St. Bartholomew's church" (247).

These explicit references to actual historical events add a sense of realism to the narrative and oppose Delano's naïve racism by evoking the horrors of slave trade and slavery as they existed in the New World. As in many other cases, Delano does not seem to be aware of what his own impressions of the San Dominick imply. There is no sign that his evaluation of slavery is in any way in concord with the historically-informed opinion that seems to be the narrator's. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the details that very clearly condemn the Spanish are provided in parts of the story that show the narrator to be detached from Delano's viewpoint. This includes not only the name "Bartholomew", but also the information that at the trial in Lima Benito Cereno was supported by a monk called Infelez (232) and later retired to a monastery on Mount Agonia (244, 247). Both names can be read as the narrator's way of commenting on the miserable end that is allotted to a man who has chosen to become engaged in the machinations of the Spanish crown and the Spanish Church. Even more condemning than the Spanish telling names is one biblical allusion which appears in the description of the San Dominick. The first part of the relevant paragraph contains a clear hint at Delano's role as focalizer ("As the whale-boat drew more and more nigh …" (166)). At the end of the paragraph, however, the limited point of view ("Her keel *seemed* laid" (166; my emphasis)) is abandoned in favor of a rather unmediated remark which must be taken to come directly from the narrator: "she *launched*, from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones" (166; my emphasis). As Mario L. D'Avanzo[25] has observed, this allusion to Ezekiel 37 presents the San Dominick as the symbol of a morally corrupt society. One of the pervading topics of Ezekiel is indeed the sinfulness of God's chosen people and its subsequent

[25] Mario L. D'Avanzo, "Melville's 'San Dominick' and Ezekiel's Dry Bones". *College Literature* 8.2 (1981): 186-88.

punishment. A very poignant example of this motive is the abomination of Jerusalem, the "bloody city" in Ezekiel 22. Interestingly, Ezekiel 37, which is the chapter that the narrator refers to, does not describe the punishment of Israel but the revivification of its dry bones through God. In "Benito Cereno", this spiritual revival is clearly lacking, given the final scene of the narrative, which shows the decapitated slave Babo interlocked in a triangle of gazes with the slaveholder Aranda, whose bones rest in St. Bartholomew's church, and the slave trader Cereno, whose dead body lies in a monastery on Mount Agonia. The hopelessness of this ending is in contrast to the divine attribution of new life and new hope in Ezekiel. What makes this contrast even more fascinating is the fact that in a passage which immediately follows the quotation in the story – 37:15-19 – God reunifies Judah and Israel to create a single nation: "Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in mine hand" (37:19). Despite the obvious differences in historical context, it is tempting to suppose that the narrator uses the immediate textual context of his quotation to substantiate his tacit claim that things – or groups of people – that on the surface appear to be separate are in fact meant to be unified.

Apart from the allusion to Ezekiel, there is only one further instance of an explicitly Christian reference in Benito Cereno – the use of words from the word family "charity". In "Bartleby", the oscillation of the lawyer between a "charitable prompting" and more self-interested impulses is crucial to the moral evaluation of his behavior. The use of classical and Christian references serves to denominate and exteriorize the opposing philosophical viewpoints that are involved in the lawyer's internal conflict. The plot of "Benito Cereno" seems to be defined by a very similar pattern in that Captain Delano is unable to decide on an appropriate response to Benito Cereno's puzzling behavior. Is he a miserable and somewhat eccentric "charity case" that deserves pity and support or is he a shrewd pirate preying on his unsuspecting victim? Like the lawyer, the American captain does not come to a definite answer and does not take any direct action against his unaccountable opposite. Apparent as these similarities may be, they should not be allowed to conceal the fundamental differences between the

lawyer's and Delano's situation. Unlike the lawyer, Delano is not in a position to act on anybody. Nothing depends on the outcome of his oscillating because the black slaves control the situation on the ship from beginning to end. In fact, Delano's oscillation is completely pointless because the alternative viewpoints that are involved in it are both wrong. Captain Cereno is neither an eccentric aristocrat, who is simply worn out by disease and want of water, nor a pirate hiding his murderous designs. Delano does not have the slightest idea of the moral import of his situation because his racist bias does not allow him to identify the only dichotomy that is really relevant on the San Dominick, which is the reversed power relation between black slaves and white masters. Interestingly, the narrator's use of the Christian word "charity" underlines the incompleteness of Delano's vision and the wrongheadedness of his refusal to examine his own notions of good and evil. The first time the word is used it refers to captain Cereno's "sour and gloomy disdain", which "the American in charity ascribed to the harassing effects of sickness" (171). While the falseness of this impression can only be deduced from the information given in the deposition, the absurdity of Delano's second charity-inspired reaction – his disdain of a white sailor with a haggard face – is denounced quite openly. First, the narrator tells us that the sailor's haggardness has nothing to do with his character. Then he adds: "Not that this reflection occurred to Captain Delano at the time, charitable man as he was" (194). The idea that does occur to Delano is that the sailor's moral constitution can be deduced from his outer appearance. As both examples show, the narrator's reference to the concept of charity is part of his overarching intention to denounce Delano's superficial and self-centered outlook on life. There is no opposition of charity and classical philosophy and no description of an individual caught between conflicting moral and social imperatives. The one element that is used to extend the concept of charity is Delano's famous "good-nature". In the conversation between the captains of the San Dominick and the Bachelor's Delight, Delano contends that "the sight of so much suffering [on the San Dominick] … added to my good-nature, compassion, and charity, happily interweaving the three" (245). Although this remark shows Captain Delano to be somewhat ashamed of his utter cluelessness during his stay on the Spanish ship, it is rather self-congratulatory and self-pitying in tone. The American mentions his charity in the same breath as his good-nature and there is no doubt that he

considers both qualities to be intimately related. By establishing this close relation, Captain Delano, quite despite himself, calls to mind the critique of good-naturedness which the narrator presents to the reader in the "in view of what humanity is capable" remark in the first part of the story. This critique is borne out by the way in which the narrator describes the scenes that show Delano's good-nature in operation. Most importantly, it is always presented as a reaction to suspicions that obtrude on the American's mind from the outside: "From no train of thought did these fancies come; not from within, but from without" (186). It is also important to note that the good-natured reaction to these suspicions is described not as an unconscious process, but rather as the result of a deliberate mental effort: "… exerting his good-nature to the utmost, insensibly he came to a compromise" (202). The conclusion that can be drawn from this mode of presentation is that the narrator wants readers to understand that Delano is not so much involved in a process of coming to terms with a morally challenging situation, as is arguably the case with the lawyer of "Bartleby", but that he is trying hard to ignore those aspects of reality that are apt to shatter his self-centered outlook on life.[26] This reading is confirmed by the narrator's remark that "credulous good-nature had been too ready to furnish excuses for reasonable fears" (223), which means that Captain Delano is being unreasonable in trying to explain away anything that does not fit his worldview. The narrator further emphasizes Delano's unreasonableness by juxtaposing references to his good-nature and rather extensive passages of free indirect speech that details Delano's misled assumptions about Cereno. The reference to reasonable fears is followed by one such passage, which culminates in the question "What imported all those day-long enigmas and contradictions, except they were intended to mystify, preliminary to some stealthy blow?" (223). Delano's good-nature "regaining its meridian" is preceded by a similar passage, which circles around the idea that "under the aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be couched" (186). Shortly before the narrator's remark bout Delano's "explaining away" (192) anything that might unsettle him, the American wonders whether "the San Dominick [might], like a slumbering volcano, suddenly let loose energies now hid?" (191). Finally, before "exerting his good-nature to the

[26] Cf. Joseph Matthew Meyer, "A Good Natured Warning: Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno'". *Connotations* 13.3 (2003/2004): 230-45.

utmost", Delano chides himself for suspecting Cereno of murderous designs: "What a donkey I was" (201). The effect of presenting Delano's erroneous believes at such great length is quite clear. It adds to the impression that the American captain is completely unaware of the perceptual and moral challenges that the San Dominick and her crew represent. As in many previous examples, the narrator tries to implicate the reader in this state of unawareness. He spends a considerable amount of narrative time on the description of Delano's continual to-and-fro between suspicion and assurance – only to reveal at he end of the story that this oscillation is entirely meaningless. At the same time he includes a sufficient number of hints for readers to realize, on a second reading, that they should have noticed them much earlier. The message of the narrator seems to be that the only person on board the Spanish slave ship that is demonstrably "too stupid" to understand the meaning of the San Dominick episode is the American captain – and, on the meta-level of the "Benito Cereno" narrative, the reader who willingly follows the "charitable" American's example.

As the examination of Delano's charity and good-nature has shown, the narrator's use of Christian elements leads us back to the all-important issue of perception and awareness. Indeed, it is one of the defining characteristics of "Benito Cereno" that all the Christian elements of the story – the allusion to the introduction of slavery on Santo Domingo, the citation from Ezekiel and the mention of Delano's charity – serve the purpose of strengthening the narrator's case against Delano's racism and willful blindness. The sparse examples of classical images do nothing to attenuate the narrator's attack; they criticize the American's belief in the inferiority of the black "race" and expose his unawareness that it is he who is in the inferior position. As a result of this congruity between the narrative configuration of the story and the use of Christian imagery and vocabulary it is much easier to pass a final verdict on Delano than it is to do the same for the lawyer or Captain Vere. Both in "Bartleby" and in *Billy Budd* the narrative configuration and the imagery that the narrator uses create a sense of complexity and ambiguity. In "Benito Cereno", despite the elaborateness of the narrative structure and the imagery that is used, the meaning of both elements comes down to one simple thing that the narrator wants readers to understand: "Captain Amasa Delano, of Duxbury, in Massachusetts" (164) has a

bad character. He is racist and self-loving; he judges others, but never questions himself; he believes in his superiority without being aware of his own intellectual inferiority; even his charity is no more than a function of his desire to contain forces that challenge his complacent worldview. It is this unequivocal indictment of its main character which sharply sets off "Benito Cereno" from both "Bartleby" and *Billy Budd*.

4. *Billy Budd* – Truth uncompromisingly told?

4.1. The ambiguous narrator

Looking at the narrative configuration of *Billy Budd* in comparison with "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno", one significant difference becomes clear immediately. While in the *Putnam's* stories the narrator's view is for the most part limited to the information that is available to the non-title character of the story, the narrator of *Billy Budd* is invested with a genuinely omniscient point of view that allows him not only to move around in time and space but also to comment freely on all the characters of the story. At first sight, this difference may not seem to deserve much attention. After all, the general layout of Melville's final piece of writing does not differ drastically from that of his earlier novellas. In all three works there is a main part which offers a chronological account of the events that befall the non-title character in his dealings with the title character. This part, which ends with the death – or, in the case of Cereno, the hospitalization – of the title character, is followed by a kind of supplement which contains information that seems to be important for a balanced evaluation of the non-title character. In the case of "Bartleby", this is the Dead Letter Office rumor, in "Benito Cereno", the conversation between Delano and Cereno on their way to Lima, and in *Billy Budd*, the Athée episode which includes Captain Vere's death. "Benito Cereno" and *Billy Budd* also contain a supposedly authentic document – the Lima court deposition and the naval chronicle report – from which the narrator quotes verbatim. In *Billy Budd* the narrator goes even one step further by including yet another document: the "Billy in the Darbies" poem about the foretopman's

execution. Seen from this perspective, *Billy Budd* seems to be little more than the continuation of a narrative practice that is firmly established in the Melville short prose canon: adding layers of meaning to an already polysemous narrative by appending segments of text that refer back to problematic or ambiguous elements of the main part of the story. Does *Billy Budd* really possess a narrative strategy of its own, or is it merely an example of the mastery that, close to the end of his life, Melville had acquired in chiseling his words and fine-tuning the components of his narrative technique?

For a first step towards answering this question, let us consider the information that is more or less openly available in the text. Like the *Putnam's* stories, *Billy Budd* contains moments of narrative intrusion, which serve to highlight the presence of the narrator and allow him to comment on the process of composing a piece of literature. The means that are used for these purposes include rather subtle hints, such as beginning a paragraph with an affirmative "Yes" (294, 319) or including an expression like "To return" (280), which reminds readers that the text they are reading has been structured deliberately. In other cases, rhetorical devices, such as questions ("What was the matter with the master-at-arms?" (307)), are used to alert readers to the fact that they cannot know what the narrator does not tell them. Even more unambiguous in this respect are phrases like "A somewhat remarkable instance recurs to me" (279), which leave no doubt that all the information that is accessible to the reader comes from the narrator and has been filtered through his mind. The omniscience of the narrator is foregrounded even more strongly when he explicitly discusses some of the most conspicuous characteristics of his narrative. These include digressions from the main strand of the plot ("I am going to err into … a by-path" (291)), the degree of detail that is included in the narrative ("… it may be well to fill out that sketch of [Captain Vere] outlined in the previous chapter" (279)), the relation between narrative time and narrated time ("Of a series of incidents within a brief term rapidly following each other, the adequate narration may take up a term less brief" (347)), and, following from the previous point, explanations and comments that are included "to the better understanding" (347) of certain events of the story.

Considering the different aspects of narrative agency that are contained in the passages just cited there can be no doubt that the narrator of *Billy Budd* possesses a fair amount of self-consciousness. At the same time, however, the picture of his narrative philosophy remains somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the limited number of openly intrusive comments does not seem to suggest that the narrator is particularly interested in making the reader aware of what he is doing. On the other hand, compared with a reader of "Bartleby" or "Benito Cereno", it is much more difficult for a reader of *Billy Budd* to ignore the role of the narrator in deliberately structuring the story that he is reading. There are two simple reasons for this difference: Unlike in "Benito Cereno", the narrator includes an obvious example of his influence on the shape of the narrative on the very first page; unlike in "Bartleby", examples of this obvious influence are not limited to the first part of the story, but occur at later points in the narrative as well. Despite this discrepancy between the limited number of intrusive moments and their conspicuous placing within the narrative, the narrator's understanding of his own role need not necessarily be interpreted as contradictory. In fact, the conjunction of outright intrusiveness on the one hand and a certain reserve towards self-reflexivity on the other is quite typical of a "traditional" narrator who is aware of his function in the process of storytelling but feels no need to expatiate on it because he takes it for granted. This uncomplicated conception of the narrator of *Billy Budd* is not in itself incorrect. It is, however, incomplete because it does not account for all aspects of the narrator's "behavior". One statement – the famous "ragged edges" remark – makes this immediately clear. The narrator's assertion that "[t]he symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction can not so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact" (358) cuts right to the heart of one of the central questions surrounding the art of literature: Should literature be fashioned on the model of reality or should literature create its own reality and fashion it according to artistic imperatives? The narrator of *Billy Budd* seems to believe that the form of literature ought to be determined by the realities that it seeks to describe. Consequently, formal imperfections and irregularities in works of art are only natural because they correspond to the essentially irregular shape of reality. At first sight, this postulation of a word-to-world relation between literature and reality may seem a rather unambiguous statement in favor of literary realism. On second thought,

however, an outspoken endorsement of art as a kind of mimicry of life appears to be somewhat out of place with the usual design of Melvillean short prose. A consideration of the context of the narrator's remark confirms this suspicion. The irregularities that he mentions explicitly refer to the segments that are added to the narrative as "something in way of sequel" (358). The word "sequel" alone is enough to recall the "sequel"(3) that the narrator of "Bartleby" adds to his story, as well as the parts of the "Benito Cereno" narrative that are "retrospectively, or irregularly given" (244). In both cases, there is no doubt that deviations from a strictly linear narration of the events concerning the title character are motivated not by the realities that underlie the story, but by the narrator's desire to create a certain narrative effect. Since the nature of the documents that are contained in the sequel of *Billy Budd* are very similar to those in the sequels of "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno", there is reason to believe that by adding such a sequel to his story the narrator is not just trying to do justice to the events he recounts, but is in fact creating a narrative design that serves his own purposes. The narrator thus fails to comply with the maxim of a word-to-world relation between literature and reality that he himself evokes. Although he has all the trappings of an intrusive and omniscient narrator, he pretends that he cannot determine the form of his narrative at his own discretion. He may also appear to be less insistent than his "colleagues" of "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno" about the need to add certain segments for a better understanding of the story as a whole. While in "Bartleby" the introductory remarks about the clerks are referred to as being "indispensable" (3) and the Benito Cereno deposition is considered "the key" (244) to the narrative that precedes it, all the narrator of *Billy Budd* has to say is that "something in way of sequel will not be amiss" (358). It should not be overlooked, however, that immediately before this remark the narrator concedes that "*properly* the story ends with [Billy's] life" (358; my italics), which seems to be a hint that the addition of a sequel is in fact not required by the events that are dealt with in the main part of the narrative.

In the main part itself it is even more obvious that the narrator not only possesses comprehensive and prospective knowledge of the events of the story, but also makes use of his omniscience to manipulate the pace and shape of his narrative. Since *Billy Budd* is conveniently organized into chapters, it is quite easy

to detect and describe the deliberate structuring of its plot. In fact, the plot structure is so regular that it looks as if Melville had devised it with a copy of Freytag's pyramid next to his manuscript. Following an extended exposition in chapters 1 to 8, the rising action sets in with the Dansker's warning Billy against Claggart in chapter 9. The confrontation of the foretopman and the master-at-arms is increasingly emphasized through chapters 10 to 14. The conversation between Billy and the mutinous sailor in the forechains directs the action towards its turning point in chapter 18, which combines the sighting of an enemy ship and Claggart's accusation of Billy before Captain Vere. The climax of the story – Billy kills Claggart – follows promptly in chapter 19. Now the "fourth act" begins and a series of retarding moments is used to "fill the time" before Billy is finally executed in chapter 25. After a conversation between the purser and the surgeon the hanging scene is completed in chapter 27. Chapters 28 to 30 constitute a kind of epilogue, which mentions Vere's death in battle, the official report that closes the Billy Budd case for good, and the "Billy in the Darbies" poem. From a structural point of view, the epilogue closes the frame that the narrator opens at the beginning of chapter 1 with his remarks about the Handsome Sailor type. As this rapid overview clearly shows, the macro-structure of *Billy Budd* is far from being the result of a simple one-to-one transposition of reality into the domain of literature. Even if we accept that the events of the narrative do have a foundation in reality, the fact remains that the narrator makes use of all the devices that omniscient narrators usually draw on to create a narrative reality that corresponds to their own thematic and ideological concerns. He adds chapters that, strictly speaking, do not belong to the story at all; he highlights individual scenes, such as the spilled soup scene, that are emblematic of the overarching issues of the novel; he develops extensive portraits of the characters that the action of the narrative brings into conflict. While in some important scenes – the trial scene in particular – narrative time and narrated time are brought into congruence, in other cases large spans of time are omitted or the exact amount of time that elapses between two events remains unspecified. Combining all these narrative devices, the narrator creates a plot structure that, following a carefully crafted rising-falling movement, drives the action inexorably forward – first towards a decisive turn in the fortunes of the main character, then towards this character's inevitable end. If this is not an example of the "symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction", what

is it? If the narrator's remark about the "ragged edges" of his narrative is already contradictory with respect to the sequel that he adds to his narrative, it appears to be outright incredible in the light of the deliberate structure of the story. One plausible conclusion that can be drawn from this discrepancy between what the narrator says and what he does is that his narrative stance is characterized by a particular kind of willful ambiguity that distinguishes him from the narrators of "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno".

Leaving aside questions of form and structure, it suffices to take a quick look at the story's most central thematic issues – who is guilty?; who is innocent?; who is to blame for the deaths of Claggart and Billy? – to come to the conclusion that the narrator's claims about the nature of the story that he tells do not correspond with reality. In the ragged edges paragraph, he emphatically asserts that his narrative offers the reader "truth uncompromisingly told". How is it, then, that readers of *Billy Budd* invariably come away from reading the novel with a feeling of irresolvable ambiguity? How is it that critics completely disagree about the judgment that should be passed on Captain Vere? How uncompromising can a narrator's desire to tell the truth really be if the readers of his story cannot even agree on whether Billy or Claggart is the villain of the story?[27] The answer that I would like to suggest is that the narrator of *Billy Budd* is consciously pulling the reader's leg by giving the impression that he is a mildly intrusive omniscient narrator who can be trusted to faithfully recount a story that has really happened. In actual fact, however, the narrator applies a strategy of double irony. He uses his unlimited narrative power, which he pretends he does not possess, to create a narrative that comes very close to being an example of "pure fiction", but at the same time refuses to use his omniscience to provide an authoritative interpretation of the events he recounts.

Now that the narrator's narrative strategy has been described in some detail, it is time to examine the repercussions that the application of such a strategy has for the moral evaluation of the story's main characters. The first

[27] Despite efforts to balance the account – Jonathan A. Yoder, "Melville's Snake on the Cross: Justice for Jon Claggart and *Billy Budd*". *Christianity and Literature* 43.2 (1994): 131-49 – one-dimensional interpretations continue to be proposed: Gorman Beauchamp, "The Scorpion's Suicide: Claggart's Death in *Billy Budd*". *Melville Society Extracts* 129 (2005): 7-10.

character that will be considered is Captain Vere. Since his decision to execute Billy Budd constitutes the moral ur-problem of the narrative, it will be particularly interesting to see whether the narrator presents him in a positive or a negative light. Next in line is John Claggart. What is the narrator's purpose in presenting a character that appears to be the embodiment of evil? Is he maybe less evil than it seems? Finally, Billy Budd himself will be subjected to close scrutiny. Is he really innocent or is there more to him than meets the eye? Before trying to answer such questions it is important to emphasize that the relevance of analyzing the way in which the narrator presents the foretopman and the master-at-arms lies solely in the contribution that such an analysis can make to our evaluation of Captain Vere's behavior in the Billy Budd case. Put in slightly simplistic terms, if Billy is innocent and Claggart is evil, Vere can only be seen as siding with evil to destroy innocence. If Billy's and Claggart's personalities turn out to be more complex, we must refrain from drawing such stark conclusions.

4.2. Captain Vere

An obvious starting point for an examination of Captain Vere's character is the extended portrait that the narrator develops in chapters 6 and 7. The importance of the two chapters is underlined at the beginning of chapter 7, where the narrator justifies the extension of his portrait by pointing to the central "part" that Captain Vere plays in the Billy Budd case (297). Yet despite this obvious hint, it would be wrong to consider every single detail of the narrator's characterization to be directly relevant for a moral evaluation of Captain Vere. It would be equally wrong to accept the narrator's portrait of Vere without trying to construe both a positive and a negative interpretation of all the pieces of information that are provided. The first paragraph of Vere's characterization in chapter 6 illustrates what is meant. The narrator's remark that Vere is "a sailor of distinction" is no doubt apt to create a rather positive image of the captain. It is also clear, however, that Vere's sailing abilities have nothing to do with his moral integrity. Similarly, the fact that Vere is said to be "allied to the higher nobility" (295) has caused some critics to view the captain as "a frightened aristocrat" who maliciously

destroys "the Saxon Budd".[28] Such interpretations disregard the narrator's explicit clarification that the captain's noble descent is largely irrelevant to his position and function in the navy. Vere's nobility, like his sealing abilities, should thus not be taken into account when evaluating the moral decisions that he makes in his function as a captain. Of much greater relevance to Vere's role as a captain – and his moral character as a person – are the two remaining remarks in the initial paragraph of Vere's characterization, the first of which describes the captain as being "mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline". This sentence not only points to the incongruity of Vere's character traits; it is an exact restatement of the moral dilemma that he faces: Should he look to Billy's "welfare" and spare him or should he punish him for the "infraction" that he has committed? By inscribing this dilemma in the characterization of the captain, the narrator makes it difficult to decide whether Vere acts in accordance with his own nature when he has Billy executed or whether he forces himself into an act which is incompatible with his disposition as a human being. If the narrator had removed either half of the sentence, there would probably be less debate about Vere's dramatic change from "father" to "military disciplinarian" (332) in the scene where Billy kills Claggart; it would also be easier to determine which aspect of Vere's behavior is more in tune with his real inner self. The second remark in the initial paragraph, which is concerned with Vere's being "intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so" is less contradictory, but similarly inconclusive in that it simultaneously highlights and qualifies Vere's intrepidity. Particularly problematic in this context is the narrator's refusal to define what constitutes "injudicious" temerity. Is Vere's behavior in the Billy Budd case "positively" intrepid or rather injudiciously so? If it is injudicious, should Vere be criticized for deviating from his normal judicious behavior or should he be lauded for overcoming his judiciousness in a moment when a certain degree of temerity is indispensable? Questions of this kind are simply not answerable on the basis of the information that is provided. It is not even clear beyond doubt whether this remark is a restatement of the welfare-discipline clause which precedes it or whether it refers to Vere's being "versed in the science of his profession" (295). In the former case, the remark has an

[28] Alice Chandler, "The Name Symbolism of Captain Vere". *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 22.1 (1967): 86-89; here: 89.

important, if ambiguous, contribution to make to a moral evaluation of Captain Vere, in the latter it must be considered to be completely irrelevant.

It is a fascinating feature of the narrator's characterization of Captain Vere that this technique of creating ambiguous references between sentence elements is reflected in the macro-structure of the *Billy Budd* narrative. The most obvious example is the relation between the characterization of Captain Vere in chapters 6 and 7 and the extended portrait of Admiral Nelson in chapter 4.[29] However uncertain the purport of the narrator's remarks about Vere's temerity may be, there can be no doubt that they are intended to remind readers of the Great Sailor's unquestionable boldness at Trafalgar. The Nelson chapter is thus not a mere "bypath" which the narrator includes for the sake of experiencing the pleasures of a "literary sin" (292); by recounting some of the best-known episodes of Nelson's life as a sailor, the narrator creates a foil for the evaluation of Captain Vere. That this implicit comparison can only be harmful to the Bellipotent's captain is obvious from the narrator's boundless admiration for Lord Nelson. The character traits that he is most emphatic about are the admiral's "excessive love of glory" and his lack of "[p]ersonal prudence" (293). This opposition of prudence, which, according to the narrator, is "no special virtue", and love of glory, which is "the first" (293), reads like a prospective criticism of Vere's "judicious temerity". The narrator confirms his criticism by introducing the "star inserted in the *Victory*'s quarter-deck" (292) as the symbol of the Great Sailor's recklessness. When the star symbol reappears in the lines quoted from the poem "Appleton House" (296), it is clear from the context that it is to be understood as an ironic comment on Vere's inferiority compared to Lord Nelson. Similarly, the famous remark that Vere has "sterling qualities" but is "without any brilliant ones" (296) acquires a distinctly negative connotation when Vere's lack of brilliance is compared with Nelson's "shining deeds" (293) and his "sterling character" with Nelson's star of glory – a comparison which is invited by the shared etymology and phonetic similarity of "star" and "sterling". What is even more, in the poem the adjective "starry" appears in the context of severity – "the discipline severe" – as one of Vere's defining character traits. In this regard, too, Nelson appears to be

[29] For an insightful discussion, see Ralph W. Willett, "Nelson and Vere: Hero and Victim in *Billy Budd, Sailor*". *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 82.5 (1967): 370-76.

largely superior to the Bellipotent's captain. There is no need for the admiral to "terrorize the crew into base subjection" (294) because he can "win them, by force of his mere presence and heroic personality" – an ability which Captain Vere, whom the narrator labels a "disciplinarian" (332) and "martinet" (358), completely lacks.

The multitude of idealizing remarks about Nelson's heroism and boldness makes it easy to overlook one comment about the admiral's character which is not damaging to Captain Vere: the assertion that Nelson was always "painstakingly circumspect" in his "anxious preparations" (293) for an encounter with the enemy. While it is obvious that in general the narrator is impressed by Nelson's lack of prudence, it is also clear that the use of the adjective "circumspect" – a near synonym of "prudent" – contradicts the claim that "personal prudence" is of no value in a sea captain. By making this distinction between Nelson's behavior before and during battle the narrator seems to invite readers to consider carefully what kind of behavior is appropriate for which situation. Applied to the comparison of Nelson and Vere, such a consideration begs the question of which aspects of the admiral's character are actually relevant for an evaluation of the actions that Vere takes in the Billy Budd case. In other words, is Nelson's heroic courage really desirable in a situation which the narrator describes as a "moral dilemma" (336)? Is his "priestly motive" (293) to sacrifice himself in battle a valid point of comparison for the "clergyman" (348) who decides to have Billy executed? The narrator seems to answer these questions in the negative when in the trial chapter he says that above all Vere needs "prudence and rigor" (335). Yet this reevaluation of "personal prudence" creates even further ambiguities. The narrator himself admits that the combination of rigor and prudence is problematic because both qualities are "not readily interfusable" (335). It is also unclear whether the prudence which the narrator has in mind in the trial chapter coincides with the prudence which is criticized in the Nelson chapter. Similarly, there is no telling whether the rigor which Vere applies in executing Billy is included in the narrator's idea of rigor or whether his conjunction of the terms "prudence" and "rigor" in one phrase does not suggest that he would have preferred a more lenient course of action. In the end, the narrator's comments on Vere and Nelson form a hopelessly inconclusive picture of the narrator's concept of prudence, rigor and

boldness. Explicit as his comments may be when considered in isolation, they become irresolvably contradictory when they are considered in combination.

Returning to the characterization of Vere in chapter 6, even more examples of this peculiar narrative strategy can be found. The narrator's comments on Vere's being "grave", "undemonstrative" and much like "the King's guest" (295) aboard the king's ship take away from the initial qualification of Vere as a "sailor of distinction". Shortly afterwards, this undemonstrativeness is explained as the "unaffected modesty of manhood" which is typical of a "resolute nature", thus restoring Vere's stature as an able sea captain. This back-and-forth between a positive and a negative presentation of Vere's character again begs the question of why the narrator invests so much care in presenting information which is contradictory and, as far as the moral dimension is concerned, irrelevant. The king's guest simile, which is mirrored by the remark that the captain is like "the King's yarn in a coil of navy rope" (298), also shows that by continuing his description of Vere the narrator does not simply "fill out" the "sketch" developed in chapter 6, but that both chapters have been carefully conceived to form one entity. Here, the narrator seems to be outright disingenuous in his attempt to mislead readers and distort their view of his narrative. This desire to mislead is also obvious from the fact that a reader who detects the cross-reference suggested by the king simile will not gain much insight into the narrator's thoughts about Vere's character, since the king's yarn simile is surrounded by the same kind of ambiguity which characterizes the king's guest simile. Although the simile represents some of the most vivid criticism of Vere, it is also the only part in the two-chapter portrait that relies on other people's opinions ("officers of [Vere's] rank" (298)). By reporting those opinions the narrator clearly damages Captain Vere. Yet by citing those opinions in inverted commas he sets them off from his own opinions and, at least implicitly, suggests that the officers' view is not necessarily correct. This warning is confirmed by the circumstance that the narrator criticizes the officers for having "minds" which are "less stored" and "less earnest" (298) than Captain Vere's. In this context, it is possible to interpret the negative remarks made by the officers as an unwilling avowal of Vere's intellectual superiority. Interestingly, it is this superiority which during the drumhead court session convinces the jury members to follow Vere in convicting

Billy Budd: The narrator says that they feel Vere to be "an earnest man, one too not less their superior in mind than in naval rank" (344). This kind of superiority, which is never attributed to Admiral Nelson, is also at the center of Vere's characterization in the first part of chapter 7. Unlike the officers, who find fault with Vere's "bookish" (298) nature, the narrator presents his "leaning toward everything intellectual" (297) in a positive light and makes sure to emphasize that the captain's interest – as that of "every serious mind of superior order" – is in history and biography. While this rather general specification of Vere's reading preferences attests to his capacity to comprehend complex situations, the mention of Montaigne must be taken as an ironic comment that is directed against the captain. The idea of "positive convictions", which Vere hopes to find in the French philosopher's works and which he thinks will "abide in him essentially unmodified" (297) until his death, is completely alien to the general spirit of Montaigne's methodology, which is defined by skepticism and a refusal to postulate definite answers or truths.[30] Although he does not acknowledge it, the narrator's method of characterizing Captain Vere is defined by a very similar refusal to make any definitive statements.

The most important effect of such a lack of definiteness is that it strongly urges against using Vere's characterization in chapters 6 and 7 as a point of reference for an evaluation of his behavior in the Billy Budd case. Whether or not this effect is considered to be problematic depends on the view that one takes of the captain's actions in the latter part of the novel. If there is sufficient evidence to condemn or acquit him, there is no need to deal with the nitty-gritty details of his portrayal in the first part of the novel. Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of the relevant chapters shows that they are just as inconclusive as the characterization in chapters 6 and 7. On the one hand, there is no denying the fact that following Claggart's accusation of Billy Budd, Captain Vere seems to be presented in a rather negative light. Some of the most obvious aspects include his manipulation of the drumhead-court, his testifying "from the ship's weather side" (337) to maintain his superiority of rank, his merciless talk about "martial law operating through us" (342) and his insistence on pitilessly administering that law –

[30] For a discussion of Montaigne's philosophy, see Robert Shulman, "Montaigne and the Techniques and Tragedy of Melville's *Billy Budd*". *Comparative Literature* 16.4 (1964): 322-30.

regardless of Billy's supposedly being "innocent before God" (342). The "troubled indecision" (340) of the other members of the drumhead court, their feeling "less convinced than agitated" (342) by Vere's arguments and, not least, the surgeon's concern that the captain might be "unhinged" (334) are all facts which seem to confirm that the narrator does not approve of the role that Vere plays in the proceedings against Billy Budd. On the other hand, it must not be overlooked that the narrator never explicitly condemns Captain Vere for what he does. The only authoritative statements that he makes are decidedly undecided: The captain "*perhaps* deviated from general custom" in selecting the members of the drumhead court, just as he "*may or may not* have erred" (335; my italics) in maintaining as much secrecy as possible. The jury members who feel uneasy about Vere's determination to hang Billy are referred to as "well-meaning men not intellectually mature" (341); the Captain of Marines is considered to be "not … altogether reliable in a moral dilemma" (336). Both remarks, which are reminiscent of the emphasis that is put on Vere's intellectual capacities in chapters 6 and 7, would seem to disqualify the sailors from questioning the appropriateness of Vere's actions, were it not for the fact that they reflect Vere's personal judgments, not the narrator's. More unambiguously negative is Vere's own claim that the Mutiny Act is like "War's child" (343) – a comparison which links Vere to the narrator's harsh criticism of the Bellipotent's chaplain. In fact, the narrator's trenchant description of this "minister of Christ" (350) serving the "God of War" (352) and sanctioning "the abrogation of everything but brute Force" (352) is the only case in which a person on board the Bellipotent is described in an unambiguously negative way. Yet even this devastating association does not exclude the possibility of interpreting Vere's appeals to duty and law in a positive way. After all, the captain's evocation, at the beginning of his tirade about martial law, of "paramount obligations" (341) which force him to act against Billy Budd does have a foundation in the narrator's lengthy comments, in chapters 3 and 5, on the importance of maintaining order in the British navy for the sake of protecting the peace of the world (290, 294).

As the examples examined in the previous paragraph clearly show, it would be vain to impose an unambiguously positive or negative judgment on Captain Vere's behavior in the Billy Budd case. Since turning to the

characterization of Vere in chapters 6 and 7 in the hope of finding some clarifying remarks as to the captain's "true" character has proved to be of no avail either, it has to be assumed that in his descriptions of the Bellipotent's captain the narrator uses the same willfully ambiguous narrative strategy which we detected in his remarks about the form of his narrative and the art of storytelling in general.[31]

4.3. Good vs. evil? – John Claggart and Billy Budd

The preceding chapter ended with the assertion that Billy Budd does not contain definite meanings or solutions that a reader could hope to find. So far, this has only been demonstrated with regard to the personality of the Bellipotent's captain. The remaining two sections will extend the analysis of the narrator's willful ambiguity to his descriptions of the two figures on whom Vere acts and who act on him: Claggart and Billy. Before launching into this examination, however, I would briefly like to evoke certain concepts and interpretations which I will tacitly acknowledge – but not endorse – in the course of my following considerations. The first concept is that of Billy as the embodiment of the innocent Christ and Claggart as the malicious, serpent-like Satan. The second interpretation, proposed by Gail Coffler, consists in viewing the Billy/Claggart couple as a "Hellenism/Hebraism dichotomy"[32] in which Billy is the joyous, carefree Hellenic figure and Claggart the dark Hebraic figure who is obsessed

[31] The narrator himself provides a poignant illustration of the way in which his ambiguous narrative strategy informs both his conception of storytelling and his character portrayals. At the beginning and at the end of the trial chapter, he uses elaborate metaphors – the rainbow metaphor (334) and the "obscuring smoke" metaphor (345) – to alert readers to the fact that his narrative does not contain any objective truths about Captain Vere. Immediately following the rainbow metaphor, however, the narrator refuses to say whether Vere is insane or not and exhorts his readers that "every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford" (334). A comparable invitation is extended in chapter 11, where the narrator says that "the resumed narrative must be left to vindicate, as it may, its own credibility" (310). The crucial difference in this case is that the parenthesis "as it may" points to the possibility that the narrative does not offer any "credible" conclusions. The narrator thus uses his narrative authority to make his readers understand that he does not have the authority to tell them what they should think about Captain Vere. At the same time, he encourages his readers to use the information contained in his narrative to form an opinion on the captain's behavior, knowing full well that the kind of information that would be necessary to do so is simply not there. This behavior corresponds exactly to the strategy of double irony which we described in the context of the narrator's remarks about the nature of his narrative.

[32] Gail Coffler, "Religion, myth, and meaning in the art of *Billy Budd, Sailor*". *New Essays on Billy Budd*. Ed. Donald Yannella. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 49-82; here: 64.

with the idea of man's inherent sinfulness. While both views rely on substantial evidence in the text, they do not incorporate all of the relevant aspects of Billy's and Vere's personalities. I will try to show that the narrator's descriptions of the foretopman and the master-at-arms contain both positive and negative elements, so that for both figures "friendly" and "unfriendly" readings can coexist side by side. In order to demonstrate this, I will first consider the aspects of the narrator's characterizations that lie outside the domain of Christianity and antiquity. Then the narrator's associations of both characters with figures taken from the Bible and Greek mythology will be examined in some detail. In this context it is important to acknowledge another aspect of Coffler's interpretation, namely that *Billy Budd* plays with – but, as I will suggest, does not accept – the "Greek view of external beauty as a visible sign of inner beauty".[33] A combination of all three approaches – general characterization, the question of internal vs. external beauty and the use of Christian/classical allusions – will yield some insight into the complex and singularly ambiguous concept of good and evil which Melville develops in his final work of fiction.

4.3.1. John Claggart

At first glance, the descriptions of John Claggart in *Billy Budd* seem to constitute an exception to the general rule that the narrator does not like to make unequivocal statements about the things and persons he describes. This is particularly obvious in chapter 17, where the narrator's use of what Hershel Parker[34] has called a "Hawthornesque" style of character portrayal creates sentences as the following: "But upon any abrupt unforeseen encounter a red light would flash forth from [Claggart's] eye like a spark from an anvil in a dusk smithy" (321). The important point here is that this passage, which is reminiscent of the description of Roger Chillingworth in chapter 10 of *The Scarlet Letter*, not only imitates certain superficial details of Hawthornian character description; it reveals the narrator's adoption of the fundamental idea that a radically flat character can be used to symbolize an abstract force, such as evil, which is at

[33] Ibidem, 58.
[34] Hershel Parker, *Reading Billy Budd* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990) 129.

work in a narrative. The narrator puts this idea into practice by creating a description of Claggart which allows for only one interpretation: Claggart is literally full of evil; his evil is like a tangible substance which occupies the interior of his body and which makes him the ambulatory representative of its own immaterial reality. Although such a one-dimensional characterization is clearly incongruous with any other instance of character portrayal that we have considered so far, it cannot be denied that there are many other places in the novel where the narrator leaves no doubt that Claggart is simply and plainly evil: He is the "reverse of a saint" (308), who has "elemental evil in him" (312) and is controlled by the "mania of an evil nature" (310). His "disdain of innocence" (312) translates into boundless "envy" of Billy's innocence, which he takes care to hide under a "mantle of respectability" (309) and "retributive righteousness" (314). There is no doubt either that the "clandestine persecution" of Billy is organized by Claggart, who, the narrator affirms, is "secretly down on him" (307). What positive points can be adduced against such overwhelmingly negative statements? For one thing, it is interesting that in chapter 8 the narrator spends much narrative time on relating certain rumors about Claggart, which, as he himself admits, "nobody could substantiate" (300). As the narration continues, the questionableness of the narrator's remarks becomes more and more palpable. On the one hand, the surmises about the master-at-arms grow increasingly outlandish. He is supposed to be a "*chevalier*" (299) trying to avoid criminal prosecution by accepting to serve in the Royal Navy, a "questionable fellow" caught by the police, a "promiscuous lame duck of morality" (300) and finally even an inmate "culled direct from the jails" (301). On the other hand the narrator constantly reminds us that all of this is merely a "rumor" spread by "certain grizzled sea gossips" (299) and "tarry old wiseacres". He refuses to "vouch" (300) for the truth of the claim that sailors are recruited straight out of jail and later even contradicts himself by saying that Claggart's depravity is not of the kind "which the gallows and jail supply" (309). If, as the narrator asserts, "the less credence was to be given to the gun-deck-talk" (301) for the simple reason that a master-at-arms, by virtue of his office, is always unpopular with the crew, the question arises why so much time is spent on reporting unverified rumors which clearly damage the master-at-arms' reputation. It is also interesting that the narrator picks out certain aspects of Claggart's personality and uses them against him, while with regard to

other characters some of these very same aspects are either interpreted positively or not commented on at all. For example, we are told that in Claggart's speech there "lurked a bit of an accent suggesting that possibly he was not such by birth, but through naturalization" (299). While in the case of the Dansker – "long anglicized in the service" (303) – nothing is made of his foreign descent, in the case of Claggart it provides a springboard for presenting all the rumors I have just mentioned. Similarly, the fact that nothing is known about Claggart's life before entering the navy inspires the narrator to compare his past with "a comet's travels prior to its first observable appearance in the sky" (301). Irrespective of whether this is a reference to the "meteor" which appears in the sky while Hester and Dimmesdale, the two sinners of *The Scarlet Letter*, stand on the scaffold at night, it is clear that the comet image carries distinctly negative overtones. Matters are completely different with Billy Budd. The fact that nothing is known about his past because he is a foundling does not seem to prompt the narrator to make negative comments about him. Instead, he has the officer who musters Billy into the navy say that he is "a pretty good find" (287) and spends the first half of chapter 2 speculating about the foretopman's "[n]oble descent" and "lineage", which he believes to be "in direct contradiction to his lot" (287). Why does the narrator allow for such inconsistencies in his character portrayals? Because he is biased against Claggart, one may answer. Why is it, then, that he does not take better care to conceal his bias, in some cases almost pointing at it with his finger? Maybe because his antipathy to Claggart is not that heartfelt after all.

One aspect of Claggart's characterization which is even more clearly positive concerns his external appearance. According to the assumption that internal and external beauty go together, the master-at-arms should be a truly hideous figure. Yet in fact, the opposite is the case. The narrator explicitly says that he is "of no ill figure", his hands are "shapely" and he has a "notable" face and "cleanly cut" features (299). Following the chapter in which Claggart's supposed depravity is exposed the narrator repeats that "Claggart's figure was not amiss, and his face … well molded" (311). In the spilled soup scene the narrator again uses the word "shapely", this time in reference to Claggart's mouth (306). The narrator also offers a rather plausible explanation for the only external feature of Claggart which is described as being displeasing. The "pallor" of his skin,

which, in the eyes of the narrator, "seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in [his] constitution and blood" (299) and which stands in "marked contrast" (311) with Billy's "rose-tan", is not so much the sign of inherent depravity, but simply "the result of his official seclusion from the sunlight" (299). A similar warning against making moral inferences on the basis of external appearance is contained in two remarks that the narrator makes about Claggart's forehead. In the first one (299) he claims that the master-at-arms has a forehead "phrenologically associated with more than average intellect", yet in the second one, which is concerned with Claggart's conscience, he asserts that "consciences are unlike as foreheads" (313). Although this sentence is apparently intended to question the functionality of Claggart's conscience, it also begs the question of why phrenology should be applied to intellectuality – or any aspect of a person's character, for that matter, including depravity and innocence – if it does not apply to conscience.

The most important point in my analysis of the narrator's characterization of the master-at-arms concerns his use of allusions to Christianity and antiquity. First of all, it is important to note that Claggart is not the Hebrew Old Testament character which Coffler takes him to be. Early on in chapter 8 his face is compared with a "Greek medallion" and the pallor of his skin with "the hue of time-tinted marbles" (299). This association of Claggart with Greek antiquity is repeated in chapter 11, where the supposedly Platonic concept of "Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature" (309) is evoked. The introduction of this concept as a reference point for the moral evaluation of Claggart is particularly remarkable in that it appears to be largely superfluous. Apart from the fact that, as Jonathan A. Yoder has remarked, "this is not Plato at his most complex",[35] there is nothing in the concept of "a depravity according to nature" which readers would not be able to deduce from the narrator's references to Claggart's evil nature in other parts of the novel. Why, then, does the narrator make use of this concept? His explanation that he cannot use "that lexicon which is based on Holy Writ" (309) because it is unpopular with his readers is not very convincing. If he really wanted to avoid Christian allusions, why does he mention

[35] Yoder, "Melville's Snake on the Cross", 133.

"Holy Writ" at all? And why does he choose to conclude chapter 11 with a reference to the biblical phrase "mystery of iniquity" (310)? The most plausible explanation is that the narrator uses the literary taste of his readers as an excuse to introduce two alternative reference points for a moral evaluation of Claggart, thereby questioning the idea of a one-to-one equation of the master-at-arms with an Old Testament Antichrist-serpent figure. This claim is confirmed by the fact that the narrator's desire to avoid oversimplification is reflected not only by the use of Christian and classical allusions but also by the narrative structure which is used to accommodate these allusions. Before the narrator begins his examination of Claggart's character, he states that he will use the method of "indirection" (308). What this means becomes clear when at the end of his lengthy discussion about the characteristics of a depraved person the narrator adds the qualifying remark that Claggart is only "*something* such an one" (310; my italics). As in his presentation of Billy in chapter 1, where the foretopman is said to be "something such too in nature [i.e. something like a Handsome Sailor]" (280), the narrator amasses information about individuals which are never explicitly equated with the character that he has set out to describe. This technique clearly questions the validity and relevance of the narrator's own definitions of depravity, including his allusions to Christianity and antiquity.

The narrative method of "indirection" as it is used in chapter 11 is an excellent illustration of the narrator's efforts to balance Christian and classical references with regard to Claggart's character. At the same time, it is the first in a row of passages where the narrator is concerned with establishing a balance between the positive and negative connotations within the domain of Christian allusions. In the conversation about an "unimpeachably respectable" man, which immediately follows the announcement of an indirect description of Claggart's character, the name of this respectable person is not written out; only the first letter – an X – is indicated. Given the fact that this letter is most likely not the first letter of an English family name, it is not implausible to interpret it as the first letter in the Greek word Χριστός, the epithet most commonly attributed to Jesus of Nazareth.[36] Further confirmation of the Claggart-as-Christ thesis comes from a

[36] It is also interesting to note that the X symbol is used three times. In view of the importance that we attached to the notion of trinity in identifying Bartleby with a Jesus-like figure, the triple use of

later comparison of the master-at-arms with "the man of sorrows" (321), an obvious reference to Isaiah 53, 3. God's "servant" (52:13), whose fate is recounted in Isaiah 52 and 53, is normally interpreted as the Old Testament archetype of Jesus Christ.[37] Does this mean that by suffering death following his accusation of Billy the master-at-arms "hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (53:4)? Is he the envoy of God whom the crew of the Bellipotent "esteemed … not" (53:3)? A single biblical reference is certainly not enough to make such a strong claim. Nonetheless, the strong emphasis which the biblical story places on the irrelevance of exterior appearance – God's servant has neither "form nor comeliness" nor "beauty" (53:2) – does support the idea that Claggart's relative unattractiveness in comparison with Billy does not disqualify him from being appointed God's representative on earth. It is also interesting to note that Billy – the more obvious Christ figure of the story – possesses all the external attributes which God's envoy is explicitly said to lack: an heroic "form", "comeliness" and "beauty" (311).

Claggart's association with God is confirmed in almost all other passages where the narrator alludes to biblical stories. A rather obvious example is the mystery of iniquity passage, which has already been mentioned. There can be no doubt that the narrator presents Claggart as the Antichrist, whose "coming is after the working of Satan" (2 Thessalonians 2:9). What the narrator does not mention, however, is the fact that the authors of the epistle to the Thessalonians make it very clear that the apparition of "the Wicked" (2:8) is a necessary precondition for the second coming of Jesus. If this hint from the context of the mystery of iniquity passage is taken seriously, it becomes inevitable to accept that Claggart is part of God's "master plan" and that he acts on his behalf in accusing Billy. The narrator seems to confirm this interpretation by questioning Claggart's free will in other places in the novel. It is true that he attacks him for having a conscience that is "but the lawyer to his will" (314), but he also associates him with a scorpion "for which the Creator alone is responsible" and which must "act out to the end the part allotted it" (312). In the spilled soup scene, which is normally seen as

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the letter X in connection with Claggart clearly strengthens the hypothesis that Claggart is in some way related to Christ.

[37] For a discussion of archetypes, see John H. Timmerman, "Typology and Biblical Consistency in *Billy Budd*". *Notre Dame English Journal* 15.1 (1983): 23-38.

encapsulating the antagonism between Billy and the master-at-arms, Claggart is described as acting only "to *some* extent willfully" (312; my emphasis). The importance of this question is of course related to the fact that if Claggart's actions are determined by God, Captain Vere's behavior in the Billy Budd case must also be seen in the context of a divinely ordained providence. Such a consideration can lead to either of the following conclusions: Vere must not be condemned because he cannot be expected to master a situation where all cards have so obviously been stacked against him; or, Vere must be condemned because he belongs to those people whose "deceivableness of unrighteousness" (2:10), according to the authors of 2 Thessalonians, prompts God to "send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie" (2:11). Which alternative one prefers depends on how far one is willing to go in taking the context of the narrator's biblical references into consideration.

Another biblical reference which allows for varying degrees of context-sensitive interpretation concerns the story of Saul and David in 1 Samuel. It is quite natural for the narrator to identify the "comely" David (16:18) whom "all Israel and Judah loved" (18:16) with Billy and the envious Saul with the master-at-arms. Yet several other elements in the book of Samuel do not seem to fit the picture. Most importantly, David is not only handsome, but also a "man of war" (16:18) and Saul's attempts to kill David are due to the fact that "the evil spirit from God came upon [him]" (18:10), which, on the level of the novel, means that Claggart-Saul is under the direct influence of God when he acts on Billy-David. The story of Saul and David also contains a very clear statement of the idea that "man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (16:7). Although this quotation refers to David being the anointed one, it can also be read as a reminder that an attractive appearance does not necessarily equal an attractive character. It is maybe also interesting to remark that before Daniel became the anointed one it was Saul who was privileged by God. He later fell in disgrace not because he was wicked but because he failed to execute fully God's revenge on the Amalekites (15:1-26).

The examples that I have analyzed are certainly not enough to reinterpret Claggart as the actual Christ figure of the novel. They are sufficient, however, to

exclude one-dimensional interpretations of his character. The narrator's straightforward associations of Claggart with evil are contradicted by the heterogeneity which is characteristic of most of his other descriptions of the master-at-arms. This heterogeneity is not restricted to the question of external appearance or the narrator's use of classical and Christian allusions; it is most obvious in his selection of biblical reference points which do not allow for simple one-to-one equations of any of the novel's characters with any of the biblical figures that are mentioned. The narrator gives us enough hints to understand that Claggart is not only the embodiment of Old Testament sinfulness, but he refuses to provide us with enough hints to develop a convincing alternative interpretation. This inconclusive characterization of the master-at-arms squares perfectly with the narrator's general narrative strategy, which consists in generating a large amount of descriptive material without enabling his readers to use this material to develop a conclusive interpretation of the story.

4.3.2. Billy Budd

Billy Budd's moral constitution appears to be as unquestionably sound as Claggart's appears to be corrupt. This spontaneous impression derives from the fact that the narrator is often very outspoken about Billy's supposedly impeccable character. He tells us, for example, that the foretopman possesses "essential innocence" (352) and has "never willed malice" (311). As soon as one subjects the narrator's descriptions to closer scrutiny, however, one must come to the conclusion that the question of the foretopman's innocence is so puzzlingly complex that it defies simplifying interpretations. Among the most conspicuously problematic issues are the following: the incongruity of appearance and reality, the exact nature of Billy's innocence and, last but not least, the heterogeneity of the narrator's references to classical and Christian figures and events.

The issue of appearance figures very prominently in the Handsome Sailor prologue in chapter 1. The narrator takes obvious pleasure in describing the Sailor's "superb figure", praising above all his unique combination of "strength and beauty" (280). When it comes to evaluating the Handsome Sailor's moral

nature, however, the narrator is considerably less enthusiastic in his praise. By asserting that the "moral nature was *seldom* out of keeping with the physical make" (280; my emphasis), he alerts readers to the possibility that an outwardly handsome sailor may well be ugly with regard to his moral constitution. This idea of distinguishing the moral and the physical nature of a person combines with the uncertain equation of Billy with the Handsome Sailor type – "Such a cynosure, *at least in aspect*, and something such too in nature, though *with important variations*" (280; my emphasis) – to form one of the most elaborately foregrounded themes of the novel: the dissociation of beauty from goodness. Many of the remarks that the narrator makes about Billy's character and appearance in later chapters can be related to this central idea. The most damaging of these remarks expresses the idea that Billy's good looks literally cover his less peaceful interior. A central metaphor in this context is Billy's tan, which is so deep that "the rose had some ado visibly to flush through" (286). Interestingly, Claggart uses exactly the same image when he accuses the foretopman before Captain Vere; he warns that a "man-trap may be under his *ruddy-tipped* daisies" (327; my emphasis). Confirmation of the master-at-arms' surmise is provided in the prison scene, where we learn that through "the rose-tan of [Billy's] complexion, no pallor could have shown" (350). This statement emphasizes the possibility that Billy's tan functions as a cover which conceals his true emotions – in this case, anguish in the face of impending execution – and consequently also his true character. In conjunction with the added remark that only "days of sequestration from the winds and the sun" (350) could remove Billy's tan, it confirms our earlier interpretation that Claggart's pallor is merely a superficial feature which does not say anything about his moral character.

In addition to the narrator's comments about the obscuring function of Billy's tan there are at least three further instances of character portrayal which refer to the problematic equation of beauty and goodness. The first example concerns Billy's muscular strength. Although the foretopman is introduced in chapter 2 as having an "all but fully developed frame" – together with an "all but feminine" face – (286), he is later described as having an "athletic frame" (305) and "thews" (321). While the foretopman's strength may not be immediately relevant to judging his moral character, it does influence our readiness to accept

that he is capable of willfully striking out at someone. The admission that Billy is not quite so feeble and effeminate as the narrator's initial comments may suggest is a clear hint that not even his external appearance need necessarily be interpreted to imply that he is all innocence. The second example concerns the question of whether Billy qualifies as a hero. The narrator affirms that "the form of Billy Budd was heroic" (311), yet when he tells us about Billy's stutter he claims that because of this imperfection Billy is no "conventional hero" (289). It is relatively easy to resolve this contradiction by concluding that only Billy's form is heroic, but not his character. In the third example the narrator appears to spell out the implications of his previous two remarks. He says that it is typical of landsmen to "exercise a distrust keen in proportion to the fairness of the appearance" (320). Although this remark refers to the characteristically unsuspecting character of Billy the seaman, it can also be read as a restatement of the warning that with regard to the foretopman's alleged innocence a "keen distrust" is not out of place.

The complexity of Billy Budd's character, which the descriptions of the foretopman's external appearance so clearly point to, is most elaborately described in the context of the narrator's allusions to classical mythology and Christian religion. The complexities which exist in the domain of classical allusions derive from the fact that Billy is associated not only with one but with several figures of Greek mythology, above all Apollo (284) and Hercules (287). As Gail Coffler has mentioned,[38] neither figure qualifies as an innocent "peacemaker" (283). Apollo, the god of healing and the arts, uses his bow as a deadly weapon and sends plague onto those he wishes to punish. Particularly gruesome cases of punishment include his revenge on Niobe – he kills her seven sons because she insulted Leto, his mother – and his flaying of Marsyas, who challenged the God to a musical contest. Hercules' track record is no less questionable. While he is generally recognized as the embodiment of valiance and virtue, he also has a reputation of being a simpleton who uses his muscles rather than his brains. He strangles the snakes that Hera sends to kill him when he is a baby, but he also kills Linos, his teacher, who dared to reprimand him for a

[38] Coffler, "Religion, myth, and meaning", 54-55.

mistake that he made playing the kithara. An even more shocking episode involves Hercules' killing all his children in a fit of madness.

In view of so obviously negative elements in both Hercules' and Apollo's biographies it is safe to conclude that the association of Billy with these figures serves to highlight the problematic complexity of the foretopman's character. The full extent to which these complexities are foregrounded by the narrator is best understood by examining not only the individual characters that are mentioned but also the multitude of interconnections that exist between them. The most important link between Hercules and Apollo, for example, is that they fight for the tripod of the oracle in Delphi. Zeus has to intervene and punishes Hercules by making him a slave of Omphale, the queen of Lydia. The conflict between both figures is also reflected in the fact that Linos, whom Hercules kills, is normally considered to be the son of Apollo. A similar relationship holds between Helios, who is often equated with Apollo, and Hercules, who shoots his arrows at Helios on his way to Erytheia.[39] The picture becomes even more complicated when the role of Achilles, another of Billy's alter egos (306), is taken into consideration. Billy-as-Achilles is educated by the centaur Chiron, yet in the guise of Hercules he wounds him with a poisoned arrow, so that the centaur is forced to cede his immortality to Prometheus to be able to die. Interestingly, in the battle of Troy, it is Apollo who guides Paris' deadly arrow into Achilles' heel. Irrespective of these links between Achilles, Hercules and Apollo, it is quite telling that the Greek warrior is chosen as a metaphorical vehicle for the description of Billy, given that it is his wrath which, according to the famous opening line of the Iliad, is the driving force of the Trojan war. This wrath is caused by the decision of Agamemnon – the alter ego of the Dansker, an "*Agamemnon* man" (304) – to take away Achilles' favorite slave to compensate the loss of his own slave, whom he was forced to return to the Trojans following a plague sent by Apollo on demand of the Trojan priest Chryses. The mythological background related to Agamemnon suggests that the Dansker's influence on Billy is not altogether

[39] Even if Apollo is not equated with Helios, the contradictory relationship between Billy-as-Hercules and Billy-as-sun-god is maintained by the fact that the foretopman is also compared with Hyperion (320), who is the father of Helios.

positive and that his warnings against the master-at-arms may influence Billy more than it seems.

This tightly knit net of classical references shows three things: firstly, it is hard to imagine that the narrator chooses his mythological reference points randomly, without being aware of the manifold interconnections which exist between them; secondly, the most important referents which the narrator makes use of all have one thing in common: they may be associated with many different qualities in Greek mythology, but they certainly do not represent meekness, let alone innocence. Achilles is most famous for with wrath and his revenge on Hector, while Apollo is most famous for his revenge on Niobe and Marsyas. Hercules embodies the problematic concept of combined strength and ignorance, which does not automatically yield innocence. Thirdly, there can be no doubt that the narrator wants us to see Billy as a complex character. It is hardly possible to imagine a narrative device which would put greater emphasis on this point than the combination of allusions to different mythological figures. In the metaphorical world of mythology, Billy really "is" several characters which fight each other. In reality – the reality of the narrative, at least – he "is" several components which do not combine to form a homogeneous whole.

In the domain of Christian metaphors we find a pattern which at first sight appears to be far more unified than the classical pattern. This is certainly true with regard to the apparently all-dominating association of Billy with Christ. The evidence in favor of this association is abundant: Billy is hanged from the cross-shaped mainmast – for "special reasons" (353) which are never specified –; he "ascends" in the early light of "dawn" – an imitation of Jesus' crucifixion in "the third hour" (Marc 15:25) –; the narrator evokes the "Lamb of God" (354) at the moment of execution and later associates the "spar from which the foretopman was suspended" with "the Cross" (361).

In many other cases, however, the connotations of Christian references are less unambiguous. One of the most noteworthy elements in this respect is the biblical serpent. In chapter 2, the narrator remarks that Billy is without "any trace of the wisdom of the serpent, nor yet quite a dove" (287). This is an allusion to

Matthew 10:16, where Jesus asks of his disciples to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves". A comparison of the narrator's comment and the Bible passage shows two things: firstly, a snake simile does not necessarily carry negative connotations in a biblical context; secondly, and more importantly, Billy is not innocent because the narrator refuses to compare him with a dove. How can he be a Jesus-like figure if he does not meet one of the crucial criteria that Jesus himself establishes for his disciples? A possible way out of this New Testament dilemma seems to be contained in the narrator's comparison of Billy with the Old Testament figure of Adam "ere the … Serpent wriggled himself into his company" (288), that is "before the Fall" (327). Yet while on the surface this reference to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden serves to highlight Billy's innocence, it also reminds us that these two innocents did in fact disobey God's injunction not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve eats from the tree because she takes it to be "a tree to be desired to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). Apparently, her ignorance and innocence are not so great as to exclude even the faintest idea of what it would be like to possess knowledge. Her desire to lose her ignorance clearly speaks against the narrator's presentation of Billy as an utterly ignorant and innocent angel who knows nothing about the temptations of the world. As far as the serpent is concerned, it is important to realize that, just like the scorpion, it is a creature of God (Genesis 3:1) and as such is not opposed, but subordinated to his will. The dialogue between Eve and the serpent is sometimes read as an interior monologue which is used to give a discursive form to Man's prelapsarian capacity to be attracted by evil.[40] Considering this biblical background, it is interesting to note that the narrator is very clear about the influence of the Edenic serpent on Billy's character. The "envious marplot of Eden", he tells us, "still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of earth" (289). Thus, if Billy is Adam, he is Adam after, but not before, the Fall.

In our discussion of the narrator's classical allusions we noted that it is the combination of different incongruous elements which creates the impression that Billy is a complex and ambiguous character. In the domain of Christian allusions

[40] "Sacherklärungen". *Gute Nachricht Bibel: Altes und Neues Testament*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997. 349-410; here: 397 (entry "Schlange").

this “cramming together” of referents does not seem to occur to the same extent. There are, however, two instances in which the narrator combines classical and Christian elements in order to provide contradictory interpretations of Billy’s external appearance. The first example appears in the narrator’s description of Billy’s inability to speak in his confrontation with Claggart. The master-at-arms’ accusations are described as “bringing to his face an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold” and as giving “an expression to the face like that of a condemned Vestal priestess in the moment of being buried alive” (331). The formal similarities between the two sentences cannot conceal the fact that they clearly contradict each other. The Christian image suggests that Billy is an innocent victim, while the classical image suggests quite the contrary. Vestal priestesses were only buried alive when they had committed the sin of breaking their vow of chastity. The second example, which takes the technique of fusing incongruous images to an extreme, is to be found in chapter 24 (351). Billy the “barbarian” – another epithet which does not necessarily suggest innocence – is “made to march in the Roman triumph of Germanicus”, a Roman general, but he is also “among the earlier British converts to Christianity” admired by the Pope. In the first sentence, Rome is the center of a pagan Empire, in the second it is the center of Christianity. This binary opposition of a classical and a Christian referent is extended in the following sentence. First, the narrator compares Billy with “Fra Angelico’s seraphs”, angels which are comparable with the cherubim “placed at the east of the garden of Eden” (Genesis 3:24). So far, the picture is still in order. Then, however, the angels are described as “plucking apples in gardens of the Hesperides”. This is a clear transgression into the world of Greek mythology, the golden apples of the Hesperides being the object of Hercules’ eleventh labor. Finally, the bizarrely Hercules-like seraphs are said to “have the faint rose-bud complexion of the more beautiful English girls”. Within one sentence the narrator jumps from the question of sin and innocence – Adam in the Garden of Eden – to a rather trivial theft – Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides – and back to the morally problematic issue of Billy’s “rose-tan”. It is characteristic of the narrator’s desire to create ambiguity that he uses the novel’s final instance of extended character portrayal to create an elaborate mixed metaphor which combines all three aspects that are important for an evaluation of

Billy's character – external appearance, Christian and classical metaphors –, but which, in the end, does not tell us anything about who or what he really is.

At the beginning of this chapter the question was asked whether *Billy Budd* can be said to possess a narrative strategy that distinguishes it from "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno". In the light of the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that the narrative strategy of *Billy Budd* consists in the narrator's desire to create a narrative that is defined by an all-permeating feeling of ambiguity. This willful ambiguity is evident in the narrator's misleading remarks about the nature of his story, it determines his undecided characterization of Captain Vere, and it is also responsible for his conspicuously heterogeneous description of both Billy's and Claggart's moral constitution. The consequences of such a narrative strategy are obvious. If we do not know whether Billy is really the embodiment of angelic innocence and Claggart the corresponding embodiment of satanic evil, how can we pass a definite judgment on Captain Vere? How can we say whether he is guilty in a metaphysical sense without knowing whether Billy and Claggart are intended to be understood as divine agents that act on the behalf of God?

I would like to add one final word about the concept of ambiguity. In the case of *Billy Budd*, ambiguity also means that the narrator willfully creates a considerable discrepancy between elaborate form and elusive meaning. In fact, the discrepancy is often so massive – think of the seraphs-Hercules metaphor – that we are forced to regard the gap between form and meaning as the only meaning which the narrator wants us to understand. Without venturing into the theoretical domain of deconstruction, I think it makes sense to postulate that Melville wants to tell us that our attempts to squeeze meaning out of his novel will inevitably lead to the conclusion that the solid and concrete information we hope to find will turn out to be complex, contradictory and volatile. Like the Hydra of the Hercules myth, for every aspect of the story that we try to resolve the text creates two conflicting interpretations which make our "labor" all the more difficult. Thus, *Billy Budd* represents the avowal that in questions of morality definiteness is not a valid goal to pursue. This does not mean that Melville accepts the world as it is. His final stage is neither acceptance nor irony. It is rather the ironic acceptance of

the fact that neither acceptance nor irony should be considered to provide a sufficient response to the moral complexities of the world.

5. Conclusion

In the introduction of this paper I insisted on the fact that although "Bartleby", "Benito Cereno" and *Billy Budd* may seem to be concerned with three unrelated topics – Wall Street, slavery, mutiny –, all three stories are characterized by a largely identical basic pattern: A self-confident "man of the world" is confronted with a "phenomenal" other person whose behavior prompts him to make a fateful decision. It is this decision – the lawyer decides to leave Bartleby, Vere decides to execute Billy and Delano decides to ignore the mysteries of the San Dominick – which defines the basic moral question underlying all three stories: How can we know what constitutes morally sound behavior? Each of the three stories proposes a radically different answer to this question. As my preceding analysis has shown, the decisive factor in describing these answers is to be found in the narrative configurations of the three stories. It is no exaggeration to say that by choosing a particular kind of narrator and by endowing him with a particular narrative strategy, Melville determines not only the form but also the moral tenor of the stories he tells. The most important element to be considered in this context is the point of view from which each narrative is told because it determines both the kind of narrative behavior and the kind of interaction with the readers that a narrator can engage in.

The narrator of "Bartleby" is a first-person narrator whose comments about the form of his narrative show that he is aware of the deliberate structuring of his story. In addition, the way in which he describes his clerks and Bartleby suggests that he has at least some understanding of the fact that the subject of his story is his own moral constitution. There is, however, no definite proof of this understanding because the narrator does not make enough comments that would allow us to conclude that his narrative strategy is really used as a deliberate means to examine his own character. This degree of narrative awareness is mirrored by the narrator's moral attitude. Just as he never explicitly says that he knows what

he is doing as a narrator, so he never acknowledges the necessity to make a clear decision about what kind of reaction to Bartleby he finds morally acceptable. If we as readers do not know whether he fully understands the moral dimension of his tale, this is exactly the effect which the choice of a first-person narrator is intended to create. In the absence of an authoritative third-person narrator we are simply not expected to discern whether the lawyer does not want to say more than he does because by doing so he would damage himself or whether he cannot say more because he does not understand the moral challenge he is facing. Far from criticizing readers for their inability to fathom the lawyer's mind, the narrative configuration of "Bartleby" encourages them to experience this inability as one of the central topics of the narrative. In the case of "Benito Cereno", the picture looks entirely different. Here, the narrator uses the technique of limited omniscience as an effective means to attack both the story's protagonist and the reader. The narrator's insistence on Delano's biased perception and the way in which he uses the deposition to disprove the American's every opinion leave no doubt that he acts from a clear moral stance and does not allow for the possibility that Delano may not be blameworthy. We as readers are blameworthy in that we fail to understand that the narrator deliberately uses a limited third-person point of view because he – rightly – expects us to believe everything that a third-person narrator tells us. In *Billy Budd*, the situation is again completely different. While the narrator's approach may be reminiscent of that found in "Bartleby", it is not comparable because it is much more extreme in its ambiguity. The essence of this ambiguity lies in the narrator's attitude towards his own narrative. Although he does not hide his omniscience, he pretends that he cannot shape his story at his own discretion, which is obviously not true. He invites readers to look for meaning in his story but also warns them that there is none. It is clear, in this context, that the narrator's incongruous character portrayals are only a logical consequence of his general refusal to commit himself to the truth value of his statements. Another consequence of this refusal is the narrator's attitude towards his readers. Since he himself does not seem to know the truth about the Billy Budd case, it would not make sense for him to criticize his readers for their failure to form a definite opinion about the moral issues of his story. He can even be said to legitimize such an undecided reaction by allowing his readers to glimpse at his own inability to make definite judgments.

The second aspect which is crucial in defining the moral attitudes of the individual narrators is their use of Christian and classical metaphors. It is a fascinating feature of all threes stories that the selection and arrangement of metaphors can be shown to depend directly from the general narrative attitude of the narrator. In "Bartleby", the Christian and classical images are used to represent opposing concepts of morality. The association of Bartleby with Christian images, the opposition of the scrivener with the Cicero bust and the mirroring of this opposition in the narrator's own oscillation between charity and prudence is some of the best evidence to suggest that the lawyer is indeed aware of the moral concepts that are available to him. His refusal to privilege either concept – despite the final reference to Job – corresponds to his refusal to dismiss Bartleby and, on the level of narrative awareness, to his refusal to acknowledge the moral purport of his story and to specify the moral judgment that it passes on his own behavior. By contrast, "Benito Cereno" is characterized by a much more one-sided use of metaphors: They all serve to condemn the Spanish slave traders. Because most metaphors link the narrative to the horrible reality of slavery, it is virtually impossible to interpret them so that they do not discredit the Spaniards. In this case, too, the basic narrative decision to write a story whose form turns against its white protagonists determines the use of images which serve the same narrative purpose. The sparing use of classical allusions must also be considered from this perspective. It would not make sense for the narrator to present a dual set of categories because, like in "Bartleby", this would create the impression that there are two different moral viewpoints from which the events of the story can be seen. In *Billy Budd*, finally, the narrator's incongruous use of metaphors does not contribute to the establishment of moral categories at all. This refusal to assign moral labels to the metaphorical spheres of Christianity and antiquity is of course the exact correlate of the narrator's general refusal to use his narrative authority to impose a binary pattern of god and evil on the complex moral dilemma which his story represents. The vividness of the Christian and classical metaphors makes them the ideal narrative device for the narrator to illustrate his far-reaching claim that the formal elaborateness of his narrative only serves to highlight its semantic emptiness. This unique use of metaphors in *Billy Budd* also reminds us that in all three stories considered in this paper it is important to interpret the imagery that the narrator uses in the context of his general narrative strategy. The source

domains of Christianity and classical antiquity do not carry inherently positive or negative connotations; the meaning which is attributed to them in each of the stories depends entirely on the narrative function which the concepts of Christianity and antiquity are intended to fulfill.

Taking a final look at "Bartleby", "Benito Cereno" and *Billy Budd*, it is probably fair to say that all stories relegate concrete topics – such as Wall Street capitalism, slavery and mutiny – to the background and focus on basic moral questions that define the human character as such. Metaphorically speaking, the underlying moral questions are so deeply ingrained in the narrative fabric of all three narratives that the application of a particular surface topic and the specification of a particular setting are only needed to give the textual fabric an external shape. The important question in "Bartleby" is not whether lawyers are bad people or whether a Wall Street man can be expected to act charitably towards his "neighbor". The important question is whether different moral concepts and standards can be accepted to exist side by side and whether a person must necessarily chose one concept and renounce the other. Similarly, in "Benito Cereno" it is not the issue of slavery that is most important. The narrator's interest is in moral deficiencies that apply to the human condition in general and are not restricted to the issue of racism. Delano's most obvious deficiency is his hubris, his belief that he is morally impeccable and thus in a position that allows him to judge other people. The slavery *décor* of the story only serves to illustrate what can happen if this mental attitude combines with greed and military power. The underlying message of *Billy Budd* is contained in the observation that in the domain of morality it is not possible to think in categories of good and evil – and also that we cannot expect to be guided in our decision by some supposedly omniscient authority.

If we try to form an abstraction of Melville's short fiction – or at least, the three examples considered in this paper – we will find that it is very similar to *Billy Budd* in that it presents various possible responses to moral challenges but does not tell us which of these responses is to be preferred. The message which we as readers can deduce from this fact is, again, very similar to that of *Billy Budd*. Questions of morality and guilt – in all their myriad forms – are so complex

that we should not hope to find simple and definite answers. Neither should we expect literature to help us determine what is good and what is bad. The contribution that literature can make to our moral deliberations lies in the fact that every piece of fiction contains one figure whose reaction to the events of the narrative is closely connected with the author's own attempts to come to terms with the moral challenges of life. This figure is the narrator. Thus, it makes sense, as I have done in my preceding analysis, to pay close attention to the particular "character" of the narrator, and in particular to the way in which he reflects on and responds to the moral challenges that his narrative presents to the reader. Even if such an approach runs the risk of conferring too much of a human-like character on a narratological construct, I am convinced that in the case of "Bartleby", "Benito Cereno" and *Billy Budd* it is vindicated by the great care which Melville invests in constructing clearly distinguishable narrator-characters and in describing the different narrative strategies which they pursue in relating and evaluating the moral problems of the stories that they tell. In the end, apart from the conclusion concerning these strategies which have already been presented, the behavior of all narrators makes one thing very clear. Just like each of them must respond, in some way or other, to the moral dilemmata that they describe, so we as readers must be prepared to grapple with morally problematic questions. The clearest formulation of this imperative is offered by the uncompromising narrator of "Benito Cereno": Because we, unlike the sun, the sea and the sky, are human beings, we cannot ignore the question of what constitutes morally acceptable behavior – we must continue to "moralize upon it".

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