Melville’s Ragged Edges: Multiple Narrators and the Search for Truth in Melville’s Moby-Dick and Billy Budd, Sailor

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The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges.

—Herman Melville

The narrator of Billy Budd, Sailor thus warns his readers not to expect any degree of neatness, narrative or otherwise, in the conclusion of his “Inside Narrative.” The close of the novella, with its three distinct endings, certainly warrants the narrator’s disclaimer, but Melville’s words describe much more than the close of his last work: they acutely describe the close of his authorial career.

In 1851 with the publication of Moby-Dick, Melville abandoned symmetry of form in his fiction in favor of a search for truth—the truth of human nature, of man’s relations with the divine, of man’s relations with others. Melville searches most vehemently for these truths in two tales of intrigue at sea: Moby-Dick and Billy Budd, Sailor. In each of these sea-stories, Melville sacrifices symmetry of narrative form to try to arrive at truth uncompromisingly told and understood. As Melville searches for truth in these texts, each undergoes a powerful change in narrator and narrative structure. Ishmael, the first person narrator of Moby-Dick, almost entirely disappears as other characters engage in soliloquy. He also presents interactions he could not possibly have observed first hand. In Billy Budd, the story’s unnamed inside narrator limits his commentary, endangers his credibility, and ends the work with a republished naval chronicle article and a poem written by Billy’s crewmates.

Both of these stories take place in the societal microcosm of ships at sea and both involve intrigue and the darker side of human nature. An obsessive, possibly mad captain leads the Pequod in Moby-Dick, while a rumored mutiny, a murder and a subsequent hanging stun the crew of the Bellipotent in Billy Budd. And yet Melville never quickly or assuredly condemns one side of the intrigue as evil and upholds the other as good. Plot developments occur in gray instead of black and white as Melville searches for the truth in every situation and finds great complexities. In both tales, Melville reflects and explores these complexities of truth by altering his narrative structure and utilizing multiple narrators and narrative forms.

In her essay, “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction,” critic Nina Baym argues that with Mardi, Melville first transformed from “entertainer to truth teller.” Baym argues that Melville continued to squabble with fiction and its (in)ability to convey truth throughout his career as he struggled to reconcile his need for sustenance with his desire to explore deeper moral and philosophical ground. She contends that Melville’s quarrel and his search for truth play themselves out through his manipulation of “fictive modes” and genres. Baym aptly describes and characterizes Melville’s continual inclusion of truth as an important force in his later works, but she largely ignores all that Melville manipulates within his fictitious plots and characters to arrive at truth. She fails to adequately explain his “fictive mode” methods.

I argue that Melville’s use of multiple narrators and narrative strategies allows him to explore truth by establishing sets of multiple perspectives on single issues—in Moby-Dick and Billy Budd, issues of intrigue at sea. Melville’s use of multiple narrative strategies within a single, longer prose work is largely unique to these two of his tales, both of which were composed as his literary career had faltered and failed with critics and readers alike. Melville’s early popular works, and early attempts at popular works, shun narrative exploration and focus less on abstract truths of man and more on descriptive truths of travelogue. However, only five years after bursting onto the popular literature scene with the straightforward travel narrative Typee, Melville firmly abandoned the sphere of the merely entertaining with the amalgamation of genre and narrative styles that is Moby-Dick.

In his “Introduction” to New Essays on Moby-Dick, Richard H. Brodhead calls Captain Ahab “one of the few American contributions to that handful of resonant
names—like Hamlet, or Lear, or Oedipus, or Faust—that seems to sum up some fact of human potential and to bare the contours of some exemplary human fate.” Brodhead fails to specify what potential exactly Ahab embodies that enables him to bare his exemplary fate of failed vengeance, but I would argue that Ahab’s potential for exposing truth gives him such narrative might and literary clout. Ahab possesses the human potential to avenge, and through him Melville explores the truth and reality of Ahab’s desires, means, and end. Melville conducts these explorations via changes in narrator and narrative strategy, and as he changes narrative perspective he repeatedly examines both the true power of a desire for vengeance and the true nature of man’s relations with the divine.

After Ahab’s appearance on the Quarter-Deck in Chapter 36, Ahab’s actions and objectives drive the majority of Moby-Dick’s (often interrupted) plot, and Melville affords multiple character opportunities to reflect on Ahab’s human potential and what it means for the fate of the Pequod and its crew. Ishmael first shares his perspective on the true state of Ahab in “The Quarter-Deck,” and then Melville makes the first major narrative change in the novel when Ishmael disappears nearly entirely from the next three chapters. Ahab is the first to give a soliloquy, and in the next chapter, Starbuck takes the narrative reigns and presents a soliloquy largely focused on deciphering Ahab. At the conclusion of Starbuck’s narrative, Stubb begins his own with Ishmael continually absent except for a few stage directions. In these four chapters, Melville utilizes four narrators all focused, at least in part, upon the same enigma: Captain Ahab and his obsession. Each narrator presents a different perspective on Ahab’s human potential for truth.

Ishmael prefaces this trio of soliloquies with a brief narrative, but he does so from a unique perspective for a first person narrator—from a third person objective perspective. He speaks of the mariners and seamen whom Ahab addresses abstractly in the third person as though he were not one of them, even though Ishmael reports that “the entire ship’s company were assembled.” Ishmael says, “the company...with curious and not wholly unapprehensive faces were eyeing him.” Ishmael never uses “we,” “us,” or even “I” in the chapter and does not include himself in the company even though he is clearly a member. Though Melville leaves Ishmael in charge, he revokes his first person privileges. As a result, this first close look into Ahab’s obsession becomes less subjective and more objective. As Melville hunts for the truth in Ahab, he does not trust the exploration to one character’s first-hand impressions, but instead utilizes a suddenly removed third person navigating a sea of characters’ reactions.

With “Sunset,” the chapter after “The Quarter Deck,” Melville makes even greater alterations in his narrative strategies and grapples to find the truth of Ahab’s potential by zeroing in on one perspective. Ishmael disappears entirely from the chapter except for the presence of two sets of stage directions. Ahab takes the role of first person narrator as he delivers a soliloquy. Ishmael excludes himself from the scene as he specifies in his stage directions that Ahab is “sitting alone, and gazing out” as he delivers the soliloquy, and Melville uses Ahab’s narration to explore Ahab’s desire for vengeance as one based on justice, divine duty, and his personal power.

Throughout the soliloquy, Ahab muses on his quest for vengeance through the use of complicated metaphors and metonymies. He bases one of his most powerful symbolic representations of his quest for revenge on the “Iron Crown of Lombardy.” Ahab muses, “Is, then, the crown too heavy that I wear? this Iron Crown of Lombardy.” The Iron Crown of Lombardy was used to crown rulers of the Holy Roman Empire and is said to contain an iron nail originally used to crucify Christ. Ahab’s choice of the Iron Crown to represent his burden yields great insight into the captain’s perspective on his quest for vengeance. Just as Holy Roman Emperors saw the Iron Crown, Ahab considers his quest both noble and ordained and bestowed by God. Ahab does not see his hunt as selfish, obsessive, or spiteful, but as a crown and responsibility given to him rather than taken up. When Melville has Ahab use this metonymy to symbolize his desire for vengeance, he considers whether Ahab’s true potential is one of god-ordained justice. He switches narrators to examine the world according to Ahab and to ascertain whether Ahab’s world is indeed truth.

With the second half of “Sunset,” Melville builds on Ahab’s invocation of the gods in the first half of his soliloquy, and he begins to question another ultimate truth: what is man’s proper relation to the gods? In the first half of his soliloquy, Ahab seems to draw justification for his vengeance via his perceived role as an agent of the divine, but his attitude drastically changes. As Ahab continues in his musings, his consideration of his quest shifts to an all-out indictment of and challenge to the gods. Ahab explores his relation to the divine as he makes a prediction: “I now prophecy that I will dismember my dismembre.” With this prediction, Ahab usurps power over his life and situation from the gods and Melville begins to explore the potential free will has in overturning any divine plan. Soon Ahab’s soliloquy switches to an apostrophic challenge to the gods. Ahab shouts, “Come forth from behind your cotton bags!...Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there,” and Melville considers Ahab’s perspective on the truth of man’s power over the gods and their will.

Melville ends Chapter 37 with the end of Ahab’s soliloquy, and he begins Chapter 38 with a fresh set of stage directions and a fresh narrator, Starbuck. Melville examines Ahab’s take on truth in “Sunset,” and with “Dusk” (Chapter 38) Melville considers the merits of
Starbuck’s view. While symbolism characterizes Ahab’s words, Starbuck remains considerably more direct. He characterizes Ahab before the close of the first sentence as a “madman” and additionally calls him an “insufferable sting” and a “horrible old man.” Utilizing Starbuck as a narrator allows Melville to explore the true nature of Ahab’s potential for and obsession with vengeance from the perspective of (most significantly) a religious person, and Starbuck takes a unique stance on the immoral and impious nature of Ahab’s desire. Starbuck’s objections to Ahab’s power and monomaniac rest almost entirely on the deeper issue of man’s relation to the divine. Critics Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford deftly argue that Starbuck views Ahab’s obsession with revenge as “blasphemous because Ahab is usurping a privilege of God: ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord’ (Romans 12.9).” Melville casts Starbuck as the devout New England Protestant, and he perhaps best reflects this role when in his soliloquy he proclaims, “His heaven-insulting purpose, God may wedge aside.” In calling Ahab’s quest for revenge “his heaven-insulting purpose,” Starbuck casts Ahab’s object not as just and ordained, but as sinful, selfish, and irreverent. Melville then makes the second half of Starbuck’s sentence an appeal to the greater power of God and consequently considers a different take on the man/god relationship. Starbuck defers to and calls on the greater power of God and accepts that as man he possesses little power over Ahab. With Ahab as narrator, Melville considers the possibility that human potential can match and surpass that of the gods; when Starbuck acts as narrator, Melville examines the potential need for deference to the gods.

After Starbuck’s turn as narrator, Melville provides yet another soliloquy on Ahab and vengeance, one offered by second mate Stubb. Stubb considers the events of the quarter-deck and says, “I’ve been thinking over it ever since, and that ha, ha’s the final consequence. Why so? Because a laugh’s the wisest, easiest answer to all that’s queer; and come what will, one comfort’s always left— that unfailing comfort is, it’s all predestinated.” Unlike Ahab and Starbuck’s thoughts, Stubb’s considerations lead him to a total dismissal of Ahab’s power. Stubb revels in the thought that human potential has no power over the events of the universe. With Stubb’s assertion that predestined fate will always trump the free will of mere men, Melville considers yet another take on the truth of the power of vengeance: that power simply does not exist. With this conclusion, Melville also considers another answer to the question of man’s proper relation to the divine, for Stubb comes to the resounding conclusion that men and their desires are mere pawns to the fateful power of the gods.

Baym asserts that “[t]ruth, in Melville’s later serious formulation, refers to the inspired articulation of intuited general laws about ultimate reality.” Melville certainly explores the truth of vengeance and man’s relation to the divine in Ahab’s quarter-deck speech and the three swift, distinctive narrator and perspective changes, but at the end of Stubb’s soliloquy, Melville seems to have not yet reached, or at least not yet revealed, any one articulation of ultimate reality. This situation changes with the end of the chase, the destruction of the Pequod, the death of the majority of the crew, and Ishmael’s epilogue.

In closing the novel with Ishmael’s fateful escape from death, Melville seems to side with Stubb and count on the truth that when it comes to man and the divine, “it’s all predestinated.” In the paragraph in which Ishmael narrates his survival after the wreck of Pequod, no less than nine counts of extraordinarily good fortune befall him. He replaces Fedallah as Ahab’s bowsman, falls just astern when thrown from the whale-boat, reaches the vortex of the sinking ship when it is mere a “creamy pool,” has the bubble of the vortex burst as he reaches it, receives a “coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea,” floats on a “soft and dirge-like main,” and meets only sharks with seemingly “padlocks on their mouths” and “savage sea-hawks with sheathed beaks” until the Rachel found him, “another orphan.” With this extraordinary blend of good luck and unlikely happenings, Melville clearly intends Ishmael’s survival and its means to be marks of the divine. Melville decidedly advocates the role of fate and predestination in man’s relation to the divine.

3

Billy Budd, Sailor’s fixation on the truth begins on the title page with the novella’s subtitle: “An Inside Narrative.” Thus from the very beginning, Melville promises a more accurate and factual look at the story of the Bellipotent’s “Handsome Sailor” by virtue of the telling coming from within rather than without. The narrator never specifies what makes his narrative “Inside,” but nearing the end of his work he promises his reader, “How it fared with the Handsome Sailor during the year of the Great Mutiny has been faithfully given.” Like Ishmael, throughout the course of his novel, the unnamed third person narrator of Billy Budd reports conversations he could not have heard personally. He is largely omniscient and freely discourses on the personal thoughts and emotions of Claggart, Billy, Vere, and the Bellipotent’s crew as a whole. Very significantly, though, the narrator ends the novella not with his own omniscient, inside commentary but with a reprinted naval chronicle news article and an edition of a poem Billy’s crewmates wrote and published to commemorate him.

The narrator promises the reader that these “sequel[s]” are merely the “ragged edges of a truth uncompromisingly told,” but both the news article and the poem present as truth two pictures directly in conflict with the “Inside Narrative” of the narrator. The narrator rebukes neither document, and he offers little commentary other than providing the historical context of each. Melville thus ends a narrative supposedly built on supplying factual and
universal truth with two sources denying its truth. The critic and careful reader cannot help but wonder, in the words of Donald Yannella in his “Introduction” to *New Essays on Billy Budd*, “What was the truth [Melville] was trying to convey?”

By the time Melville died leaving *Billy Budd* unfinished, he was considerably more disillusioned than he was while penning *Moby-Dick*. Melville had lived through the Civil War and Reconstruction and had suffered the failure of his masterpiece and his literary career. With *Moby-Dick*, Melville used multiple narrative strategies and perspectives to explore and eventually arrive at truth, but when Melville tried to do the same in *Billy Budd*, the nearest he got to truth was the concession that, in Baym’s words, “intuited general laws about ultimate reality” might not exist. As John Wenke argues in his critical essay “Melville’s Indirection: *Billy Budd*, the Genetic Text, and the ‘Deadly Space Between,’” Melville continually crafted and recrafted, cast, and recast the story and characters of *Billy Budd*. Wenke explains, “Melville’s shifting intentions, and the words that reflect them, emerge as part of a complex activity of trial and transformation. Indeed, over five slow years, Melville was rereading and remaking a text that intrigued, haunted, and even baffled him.” Like Ahab hunting the White Whale, Melville was hunting truth, and he never captured it.

Close readings of *Billy Budd*’s final two chapters and the narrative changes they contain reflect the lack of and undermining of the truth of the “Inside Narrative.” In his preface to the naval chronicle article that serves as the centerpiece of Chapter 29, the narrator specifies that the article was published in a chronicle that was “an authorized weekly publication.” He says the article was “doubtless written in good faith, though the medium, partly rumor, through which the facts must have reached the writer served to deflect and in part falsify them.” Though with these words the narrator attempts to brand the article false, a careful reader uses this preface to question the authority of the narrator as much as the authority of the naval chronicle. The narrator specifies that the naval chronicle was “an authorized weekly publication,” but he never reveals so much about his own credibility or role. He presents himself as the ultimate myth debunker in the story of Billy Budd, but he never alludes to his sources of information or his investigative methods. The narrator additionally calls the article “written in good faith” just a chapter after he deems his own account “faithfully given.” The narrator’s tying of “faith” to his own supposedly true account and an account he deems false asks the question of how much “faith” is really worth in matters of truth.

The naval chronicle article goes on to present characterizations of Claggart and Billy that clearly contradict the portraits painted by the narrator in the earlier parts of the narrative. Billy appears as “one William Budd,” a mutinous, criminal “ringleader” of “extreme depravity” who “vindictively stabbed” (rather than hit) and killed Claggart. Claggart is portrayed as a “man respectable and discreet” with a “strong patriotic impulse.” Like the narrator, the article presents no sources for its content, but it presents each and every detail as a careful, faithful recitation of fact. Some editorializing certainly occurs in adjective choice and characterization, but it exists in the article in no greater a degree than it does in narrator’s earlier words. The narrator does not dwell on the article’s supposed inaccuracies. Instead, he specifies that it “is all that hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd.” With these final words on the article, Melville only further endangers his narrator’s claims to the possession of truth. If this article were all that existed and Claggart, Budd, and Vere have all since died, how did the narrator come into the actual truth of his narrative? Melville hacks away at his narrator’s credibility and leaves his reader intrigued, haunted, and baffled regarding the truth of Billy and Claggart.

Even without the testimonies of Capt. Vere, Billy, and Claggart, the crew of the Bellipotent survives to tell the tale. However, as the final chapter of *Billy Budd* proves, their rendition of events differs not only from that of the naval chronicles but also from the narrator’s version. In the narrator’s prologue to “Billy in the Darbies,” the crew’s reaction to the proceedings, he exercises his omniscience in his characterizing the knowledge and emotions of Billy’s crewmates. The narrator indiscriminately clumps them all together and says, “Ignorant though they were of the secret facts of the tragedy… they instinctively felt that Billy was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of wilfull murder.” The narrator’s earlier story corroborates the crew’s opinion of Billy’s inabilities to mutiny and commit murder, but significantly, the crewmates’ poem makes no reference to Billy’s guilt or innocence or the situation that forced Billy into the darbies. Though both the narrator and the naval chronicle concern themselves with the “facts of the tragedy,” the crewmates’ poem is based on imagined details and presentation of “the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor.” In ending his novella with this change in focus, Melville seems to abandon his hunt for truth in the events aboard the Bellipotent and instead settles merely with a re-imagining of Billy.

A first-person representation of Billy narrates the poem, and the lines work to illustrate Billy’s grand naïveté and good nature beyond all other facts. The first lines present Billy as humble and unselshish: “Good of the Chaplain to enter Lone Bay / And down on his marrow-bones here and pray / For the likes just o’ me, Billy Budd.” Billy’s crewmates are also sure to cast his naïveté: “But Donald he has promised to stand by the plank; / So I’ll shake a friendly hand ere I sink.” When Melville switches narrators and narrative strategies in this chapter, he uses the
crewmate’s poem and first person Billy to largely support the narrator’s earlier characterization of Billy.

Nevertheless, Melville’s narrative changes provide important insight into his search for truth. While the narrator concerns himself with the “truth” of the factual details and events of Billy’s time on the Bellipotent, the scene of “Billy in the Darbies” is completely imagined. Melville ends both the chapter and the entire novella with the crew’s imagining. Melville offers no grand summations or universal articulations in the poem or its preface. Instead, with the last line of the poem, Billy lies somewhere between human sleep in the brig and eternal sleep at the bottom of the sea, and his guilt or innocence remains unaddressed. There are no questions of justice, authority, or morality and there is no grappling for truth. Instead, Billy and Melville have given up and are quiet.

4

In his essay “Moby-Dick as Sacred Text,” critic Lawrence Buell proclaims that Melville “like[d] to think of his vocation as truth telling rather than tale telling.”

Examinations of Moby-Dick and Billy Budd testify to the truth of Buell’s argument and to Melville’s own obsession with truth. As Melville explored the truth of the power of vengeance and man’s relation to the divine in Moby-Dick, he deftly changed narrators to use perspective in his considerations, and with Ahab’s destruction and Ishmael’s survival, he crafted his masterpiece’s ending to reflect his conclusions. With Billy Budd, Sailor, Melville’s take on truth and its very existence seems to have changed. He uses the same literary strategy in altering narrator to explore truth, but Melville’s presentation of the naval chronicle article only casts doubt on his narrator’s earlier avowed truth. In ending the novella with the imaginative poem by Billy’s crewmates, Melville seems to question whether universal truths are worthwhile or even possible. The novella and Melville’s “vocation of truth telling” ultimately end with doubt, irresolution, and the death of both Billy and Melville.

Endnotes

4 Ibid., 137.
5 Ibid., 141.
6 Ibid., 143.
7 Philipp Blom, To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting, (New York: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2002), 146.
8 Melville, 143.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 144.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 139.
13 Ibid., 144.
14 Ibid., 145.
15 Baym, 910.
16 Melville, 427.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 381.


25 Ibid., 117.

26 Melville, Billy Budd and Other Stories, 382.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 383.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 384.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 385.


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