Melville’s Reliquary Reformations

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“Peace to Lord Nelson where he sleeps in his mouldering mast! but rather would I be urned in the trunk of some green tree, and even in death have the vital sap circulating round me, giving of my dead body to the living foliage that shaded my peaceful tomb.”

Herman Melville, White-Jacket

“A drop of Nelson’s blood, wouldn’t do us any harm,
An we’ll all hang on behind...
We’ll all be alright when the skipper’s in his grave.”

Traditional “stamp and go” sea chanty

“The lust of fame is the last that a wise man shakes off.”

Checked in Melville’s copy of Schopenhauer’s Wisdom of Life

In the compositional present of Melville’s death two chapters of Billy Budd were held back, set apart in folders—chapters four and seven, the chapters given respectively to unfolding the characters of Nelson and Vere. In Reading Billy Budd Hershel Parker gives us one plausible reason why the Nelson chapter had entered this sort of compositional purgatory—Melville “sensed or saw that it set up a standard of comparison against which Vere would always come up short” (112). Indeed, measured alongside the centrality of Billy’s death in the manuscript, and that of Nelson in the Beatty and Devis works that I examine in what follows, Vere’s death in chapter twenty-eight does come up short. It is treated in the manuscript as an a—“symmetry of form,” a “ragged edge” (Melville 2017, 68-9) that the narrator fails to resolve in a pregnant “six-inch chapter” inversely reminiscent of the apotheotic death of Bulkington in Moby-Dick’s “The Lee Shore” (Melville 1988, 106). Even in recounting Vere’s death, the narrator is drawn back to Billy’s, as if by magnetic force, and the chapter ends with meditation on the dying captain’s opium-induced incantation of Billy’s name, recentering Melville’s titular character, mapping one death over the one ostensibly at stake. We are led to think Vere’s words, “Billy Budd, Billy Budd,” are voiced in adoration, though we can be sure only that they are “not the accents of remorse” (69). The scene quietly enacts exactly the critical displacement I would like to attend to here. By his death, I argue, Melville
had so turned from the Vere/Nelson comparison, had become so absorbed reforming what I have come to call the Nelson archive within his figuration of Billy that both captain and admiral, in Melville’s mind, and not unlike Ishmael at the ending of the American edition of *Moby-Dick*, are left “floating on the margins of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it” (Melville 1988, 573). But none of this can become visible without appreciating the centrality of art to Melville’s aesthetic.

2 From the young author’s early, Irvinesque engagement with the picturesque in *Typee* and *Omoo*, through the Turnerian sublime of *Moby-Dick*, or, leaping forward to the subject of this essay—the late author’s ekphrastic, counter-hagiographic engagement with Horatio Nelson memorial art in *Billy Budd*—much of Herman Melville’s aesthetic development unfolded in deep communication with the visual arts. Indeed, one might trace the writer’s entire career by way of attractions, repulsions, inversions, absorptions, and other reactions to the sister arts.

3 This knowledge now goes a long way back, but we can sample it briefly here. Almost thirty years ago Christopher Sten edited *Savage Eye: Melville and the Visual Arts*. This indispensable volume gathers interdisciplinary essays on what, just a few years later, Douglas Robillard cataloged as “Melville’s engagement with the art analogy” (x). In *Savage Eye*, five months before his exhaustive *Melville and Turner*, Robert K. Wallace argued that the author embraced “Turner’s powerfully indistinct aesthetic” (Wallace 1992, 73) in his thick description of the “boggy, soggy, squitchy picture” hanging in the entry to the Spouter Inn, but also more generally as a guiding aesthetic principle in *Moby-Dick* (Melville 1988, 12). As far back as 1985 Wallace had noted the significance of Nelson art, placing Melville before Turner’s *The Battle of Trafalgar* at Greenwich Hospital’s Painted Hall during his London trip in late 1849 (Wallace 1985).

Sterling Stuckey considered Nelson art that a young Melville saw even earlier, during his 1839 greenhorn trip to Liverpool. As a walker in the city Melville had come across a Nelson Monument—a sculptural grouping dedicated in 1813. In *Redburn*, Melville used this experience, projecting what Toni Morrison has taught us to call an *Africanist presence* onto the grouping. In a remarkable reading Stuckey argued that this Nelson art re-entered Melville’s work again after *Redburn*, as the brooding, buried inspiration for brutal figurations of white racial oppression in *Benito Cereno*.

4 After *Moby-Dick*, as Melville aged, traveled, read, visited galleries, and collected prints, his commitment to the sister arts only grew and deepened. Paul Giles, writing in 1998, called *Billy Budd* the “culmination” of Melville’s long, cross-cultural entanglement with Englishness—a “narrative whose specific engagement with British culture has not sufficiently been recognized” (242). This essay seeks to continue that work of recognition by opening a new aperture onto the significance of the Nelson archive, especially hagiographic Nelson art impactful in the making and meaning of *Billy Budd*. When carefully considered, Melville’s late, evolved ekphrastic aesthetic of the indistinct brings into tighter focus our appreciation of his skeptical, piercing worry over the precarity of American democratic ontology nearing the close of the 19th century. We can enter the Nelson archive by telling an old story in a new way.

5 On 21 October, 1805, at “about fifteen minutes past one o’clock,” in the Atlantic, off Southern Spain’s Cape Trafalgar, Admiral Lord Nelson, targeted by a French musketeer from the mizen-top of the French, 74-gun *Redoubtable*, was shot through the left epaulette of his dress uniform and dropped to the deck of the 104-gun *HMS Victory*. Carried below to the cockpit, Nelson lived long enough to know of English victory, but
died after only two hours and forty-five (Beatty 52) or three hours and fifteen minutes (Southey 284). Among the attendants at his agonies was William Beatty, the ship's chief surgeon.

When what usually gets told just here was over (the slow death narrative we might call the Passion of Nelson), when the victorious but mourning British fleet, damaged and already storm-tossed, turned back toward England via Gibraltar, Beatty ordered Nelson's corpse preserved: "a cask called a leaguer, which is of the largest size on shipboard, was [...] chosen for the reception of the Body; which, after the hair had been cut off, was stripped of the clothes except the shirt, and put into it, and the Cask was then filled with brandy"—a nicety not offered the “one-thousand five hundred and eighty-seven” other sailors, enlisted and impressed, who also died on the English side at Trafalgar (Beatty 61, Southey 287).

On December 11th, 1805, after much struggle to reach Portsmouth, Dr. Beatty took “Lord NELSON’S Body [...] from the cask in which it had been kept since the day after his death” (Beatty 66). Not unlike the preserved, “honeycombed gray-greenish bone[s] / Of storied saint” Sabbas (Melville 1991, 3.23.87-88), which in the winter of 1856 Melville had viewed enshrined in the Catholicon at Mar Saba—more than thirty years before leaving Billy Budd in manuscript—Nelson’s corpse was something to behold. “On inspecting it externally, it exhibited a state of perfect preservation,” wrote the doctor, “without being in the smallest degree offensive. [...] It was at this time that the fatal ball was discovered: it had passed through the spine, and lodged in the muscles of the back, towards the right side, and a little below the shoulder-blade” (Beatty 66-67). In clinical prose intimating that the fatal ball had been sanctified in the act of killing Nelson, even that it had miraculously gilded and clothed itself in a kind of natural reliquary fereter, Beatty relates that “A very considerable portion of the gold-lace, pad, and lining of the epaulette, with a piece of the coat, was found attached to the ball: the lace of the epaulette was as firmly so, as if it had been inserted into the metal while in a state of fusion” (67). With Dr. Beatty on the Victory at the moment of this discovery was the painter Arthur William Devis, who had been released from debtor’s prison to make a visual record at the Nelson autopsy. This partnership culminated in an intimate, monumental, 1807 canvas that became a centerpiece of The Painted Hall at Greenwich after 1825, and that Melville saw in 1849 alongside many other works, including Turner’s distanced portrayal of maritime warfare. In his journal for Wednesday, November 21st, 1849 Melville wrote: "Greenwich Hospital. Crowds of pensioners. Went into the Painted Hall—sea pieces [sic] & portraits of naval heroes, coats of Nelson in glass cases. Fine ceiling" (Corr 22).

Nelson’s subsequent funeral procession, by black shallop barge on the Thames, was a spectacle one might appreciate (in the American grain) only with reference to Lincoln’s overland funeral procession. To date, more than seventeen thousand books have been published in the Lincoln industry. Respecting Nelson, there are now more than a hundred biographies. The first Nelson volume to reach print, though, was Beatty’s 1807 volume, from which I have been quoting. This life shot to print quickly because of its narrow focus; its wonderful title helped it in a hungry marketplace: "AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE OF THE DEATH OF LORD NELSON: WITH THE CIRCUMSTANCES PRECEDING, ATTENDING, AND SUBSEQUENT TO, THAT EVENT; THE PROFESSIONAL REPORT ON HIS LORDSHIP’S WOUND, AND SEVERAL INTERESTING ANECDOTES. BY WILLIAM BEATTY,
M.D. Surgeon to the Victory in the Battle of Trafalgar, and now Physician to the Fleet under the Command of the Earl of St. Vincent, K.B. &c. &c. &c.”

Robert Southey’s popular *The Life of Nelson* followed relatively late in the train of early secular hagiographies; it was not published until 1813. Reading page 294 in his copy of Southey, Herman Melville took a pencil and scored a passage containing a footnote, and then, at the bottom of the page, he also scored the footnote itself, which reads: “In this part of the work I have chiefly been indebted to this gentleman’s [Dr. William Beatty’s] Narrative of Lord Nelson’s Death—a document as interesting as it is authentic.” This is the volume with his wife Elizabeth’s (Lizzy’s) front notation, telling us that it was “kept for reference from ‘Billy Budd’ (Unfinished).” We do not know precisely when Melville marked his 1855 edition of Southey, but as I argue below, he likely did so early in the genesis of *Billy Budd*. The passage Melville scored in Southey tells of the ornamented jacket Nelson wore at Trafalgar, of how Beatty had tried to get Nelson to “change his dress, or [at least] cover [his] stars” lest he become a target for French sharpshooters in the rigging (294). Rushing to print, Beatty was largely uninterested in the early life of this god-of-Englishness. Instead, centering on the hero’s death at Trafalgar, the *Narrative* details in clinical, sometimes gruesome detail how Beatty attended the dying hero, and how, in the homebound weeks afterward, he kept watch over the corpse—twice refreshing the spirits in the coffin-cask—and also how he performed an autopsy. Melville’s scoring of the footnote does not confirm that he read the Beatty *Narrative*, but the marginalia at least shows his interest in it. Melville’s personal copy of Southey, though, is in hand, and while valuable in its own right as a source, it also appropriates large passages from Beatty and generally resonates with the counter-hagiographic reliquary formations in *Billy Budd*.

Chapter thirty of the genetic text of *Billy Budd*, which includes “Billy in the Darbies” and which reiterates the trope of relic keeping so common in the Nelson archive, begins as follows: “Everything is for a term venerated in navies. Any tangible object associated with some striking incident [...] is converted into a monument. The spar from which the foretopman was suspended was for some years kept track of by the bluejackets [...]. To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross” (71). Hayford and Seals tell us that while Melville elsewhere wrote casually of relic-keeping, this passage “resembles Southey’s statement [...] that sailors preserved ‘as relics of Saint Nelson pieces of [his] leaden coffin [...] and [...] fragments of his flag’” (Melville 1962, 201). But they miss that Southey had mined Beatty, and that Beatty had partnered with Devis in the *Narrative* to illustrate an actual Nelson relic, one that may color our assessment of the Nelson chapters.
Devis’s partnership with Beatty after the autopsy includes a double illustration of the musket ball that killed Nelson, first as it was retrieved from Nelson’s spine, and then of the ball encased within a crystal locket fereter. Captain Thomas Hardy had the relic made and then gifted it to Beatty. The provenance of this be-jewelled thing was secured by Beatty’s own book, and by many reports he wore his Nelson relic until his death, after which it was given to Queen Victoria. The faithful can occasionall y still make pilgrimage to see it.

The entire manuscript of *Billy Budd* is shot through with pendant and jewel imagery. The Nelson core of this pattern appears at the closing of chapter four where the narrator, turned hagiographer, defends Nelson against “some” “of the new order” for having published himself “in the jewelled vouchers of his own shining deeds” (15). A constellation of other moments, before and after, orbit this usage of the word “jewel,” and would seem to culminate in Billy’s jewel-block transformation in the closing lyric: “A jewel-block they’ll make of me tomorrow, / Pendant pearl from the yard-arm-end / Like the ear-drop I gave to Bristol Molly—” (71). Notice that even punctuation, Melville’s overt use of four hyphens in these lines, formally calls attention to the tethering, or hanging of things, and by extension to Billy’s execution. We might find that this pendant trope carries us not out, for example by allusion into the red record of lynching in Melville’s America, but if we turn to the complex genetic text, we find that the trope also carries us back, to the inside story, or compositional origins of Melville’s tale. In what is now leaf 3v of “Daniel Orme” “which at stage A began Melville’s headnote to the ballad, [and which] is all that survives of the prose” beginning of “what became *Billy Budd, Sailor,*” we find that even at the outset of Melville’s imagining the handsome sailor is already described as “the jewel” (Sealts Plate I, 201).
A “jewel block” is a single, 7-inch block at the extreme-end of a topsail or topgallant yard, through which stun’sl halyards are reeved. The head of the stun’sl, when set, is hoisted up to this jewel block. Put simply for landlubbers like me, when a square-rigged ship puts on extra sail, this small block is used to pull that extra sail up and set it. In this process the jewel block itself does not rise, but stays rigidly in place. In Melville’s closing lyric, Billy figures himself first as forcibly made into this “jewel-block,” then, starting to take possession of his metamorphosis, he imagines himself a “pendant pearl” swinging “from the yard-arm-end,” only to have association float him back in remembrance to “the [pearl] eardrop [he once] gave Bristol Molly” (71-72). The single word, “pearl”—as yet unsupported by metaphor, though an obvious biblical allusion to the pearl of great value (in Matthew 13, 45-46)—actually returns us to the first manuscript fragment of the work, Melville’s original 1885 inkling of the larger story. “Pearl” and “eyes” and especially the word “fathoms” also point unmistakably to Ariel’s drowning song in The Tempest; “Full Fathom Five thy father lies” (1.2.395-401). We must remember those “pearls” that were Alonso’s eyes. Shakespearean allusion matters here first for its beauty and resonance within Melville’s poem, but also because Ariel’s Ovidian transformation of Alonso’s eyes into pearls is fantasy; he manipulates the castaways, lies to Ferdinand about the death and “sea-change” of his father, the king. The Shakespearean version is a dreamscape that will lead through enchanted sleep to resurrection in the plot of the romance, where Billy’s dreamy version is “no romance,” but instead a terrible waking fantasy of sleep that twists like a noose around the reality of his impending execution (11).

Because Melville’s lyric has hung from the start like a pendant pearl from the expanding prose body of the tale, we are invited to follow the chain of jewel references back through the work. As early as chapter one we find the “black Pagod of a fellow,” the prototype of Billy, echoed by the character Tawney in chapter seventy-four in White-Jacket. Melville’s archetype wears “in his ears [...] big hoops of gold” (4). What James Noel calls “deep minstrelsy” invites us to read the figure forward to Billy in the halter, and as patterned reference to the post-Reconstruction rise of lynching in the 1880s. In fact, the pendant imagery in “Darbies” might, if we let it, (we won’t here), swing us all the way back to “the Portent,” the opening verse in Battle-Pieces, where we find John Brown’s white body “hanging” in the place of so many black bodies past, and to come. He hangs there, variously reified “from the beam”—Melville’s emblem of law’s Northern and Southern interpretive swing, the conflict of convictions that resulted in secession (Melville 2009, 5).

There are other prose moments where Billy is figured as a jewel. Early on, aboard the Rights of Man, he is twice called the “Jewel of” the crew (5, 6). In chapter two, the narrator relates a scattered chapter from Billy’s unknown life. Pulled subtly through the biblical story of another foundling set adrift, Moses, Billy’s rumored origins foreshadow his coming abandonment: “I have heard I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket,” he says, “hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man’s door in Bristol” (9). But of all the moments in the manuscript leading up to the climax of Billy’s apotheotic hanging, one is most important for its largely overlooked ekphrastic connection to the death of Nelson.

In chapter twenty-four the narrator commands us to “behold” the peculiarly illuminated tableau of “Billy’s agony:” the handsome sailor “lying prone in irons” (61). Melville has placed him between black-tarred guns that are “mounted on lumbering
wooden carriages,” where he “dimly glimmer[s]” surrounded by diffuse, impersonal light (61). In this thick description we encounter Billy, not unlike Nelson in Devis’s *The Death of Nelson*, mounted like an ethereal jewel against surrounding “funereal” darkness (61). Prolepsis figures Billy—“in effect, already in his shroud” (61). Melville’s ekphrastic debt to Arthur Devis may be indirect, but it is no less striking for that. Both are inside narratives, both are set below-decks, between the thick wood walls of cockpit or upper-gun deck. Both feature “the massive beams of the deck above” (61). In both battle-lanterns frame a central funereal figure, more or less in white.

But from here our way into Melville’s *tableau* turns on his many inversions and manipulations of Devis’s hero-making canvas. In Melville Billy is “prone,” while in Devis Nelson is supine. In Melville two battle-lanterns swing. In Devis *three* lanterns are fixed, as if a calm has ensued. Clear light carefully restricts to fully illuminate only the senior officers, while at the margins the more common sailors, sailors more like Billy, are only dimly illuminated. Even Melville’s parenthetical notice that war contractors have provided the lamp oils to reform Devis. Unlike Melville’s pilot-fish in “The Maldive Shark” these men do “partake of the feast” (Melville 2009, 236); they are symbiotic with war’s larger violence, its “harvest of death” (Melville 2017, 61), as Melville writes, making clear allusion to Timothy H. O’Sullivan’s gruesome, Civil War photographic landscape by that name. Garner’s extended caption to this *Sketch Book* image reads in part as follows: “Such a picture conveys a useful moral: it shows the blank horror and reality of war, in opposition to its pageantry” (Garner).

In the thick description of chapter twenty-four Billy is of course alone, under derelict guard. This is emphasized in line twenty-nine of the lyric, set within the same scene—“Sentry are you there?” (72). Billy’s words resonate with the topsy-turvey opening phonemes of *Hamlet*—“Who’s there?” Francisco should say these words on the battlements of Elsinore, not Barnardo, who has come to relieve him. In both tragedies the moral order is out of joint. A killer is king in Elsinore. An “angel must hang” aboard the *Bellipotent* (47). Devis, on the other hand, works hard to refuse such corruption. He literally highlights the continuity of power through his attention to the classical organ of genius, the forehead, which is strikingly illuminated on both Nelson, and, up to the right, also on Thomas Hardy, who is about to inherit Nelson’s command. If the painting captures the moment of Nelson’s death, this transference of light to Hardy memorializes not religious apotheosis as in Beatty’s classical sources, but the continuity of secular command. In contrast with Melville’s *tableau*, which emphasizes Billy’s abandonment by power, the clearly delineated officer grouping in the Devis canvas speaks to the redundancy, and thereby to the secure provenance or genealogy of maritime command, British sovereignty, and empire. The emergence of this idea in Devis’s imagination can be traced to a preparatory oil sketch, now at Windsor Castle, where the transference of light from Nelson to Hardy’s brow has its compositional origins. To allay anxiety over the lurking survival of “discontent” among The People, as common sailors *en masse* were then known, a popular print made from an etching of the painting came with a key for unlocking the picture’s personages, for locking down the message about order and discipline in the fleet. Melville’s *tableau*, on the other hand, formally dissolves such hierarchy, unless, that is, it displaces hierarchy through the narrator’s luminist *paean* to the intrusion of a higher, more natural law and order. It is not the “dirty yellow […] polluting” “light” of the “battle lanterns” but the “the obscure light of the bay” that illuminates Billy; in the poem it streams “through the port […] the moon-shine astray!” to reveal the prisoner “already in his shroud.”
“glimmer[ing]” “like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at some upland cave’s black mouth” (61, 71, 61)."

In the painterly tradition Devis entered, Romance and Realism battled for supremacy. Hagiographic Nelson pictures by Benjamin West, J.W.M Turner, Devis, and others were all criticized for temporal, factual, and representational inaccuracies as they attempted to condense reported history to their painted surfaces. But in Devis this tendency toward overdetermination is also apparent within the register of religious iconography. The Greenwich Maritime Museum’s didactic of *The Death of Nelson* says the work “incorporated the conventions of Renaissance religious painting, the composition recalling many representations of Christ’s descent from the Cross.” This is so, but the statement does not reach far enough into Christian iconography. The heavy oaken knees and stanchions behind Nelson certainly suggest descent scenes, but the canvas alludes as easily to the *pietà* and burial-of-Christ traditions. Moreover, Melville describes Billy as “taking on something akin to the look of a slumbering child in the cradle,” making clear reference to the nativity tradition in the sister arts, which is also clearly at play in Devis (61).

But Melville’s most complex ekphrastic extension from the Devis canvas occurs at the opening of chapter twenty-four, where we are commanded to attend to Billy, “lying prone in irons in one of the bays formed by the regular spacing of the fixed guns compromising the batteries on either side. All these pieces,” the narrator tells us, “were of the heavier calibre of that period. Mounted on lumbering wooden carriages they were hampered with cumbersome harness of breeches and strong side-tackles for running them out” (61). We are meant, I think, to remember Melville’s punning presentation of Billy as a “peacemaker” (6). The homonym, “pieces,” reminds us that Billy too is a kind of gun, a loose cannon, a peacemaker, the name for the gun that was at the time winning the West, as the contemporary saying had it—the colt pistol, which Melville had written of in *The Confidence Man*. These three *pieces*, two “on either side” and Billy between, present spare formal reference to Golgotha. Indeed, the slow pacing of Melville’s deeply visual description of Billy in his darbies seems to turn from within the allusivity of Devis’s aesthetic to re-paint “the Spouter Inn” picture from *Moby-Dick*. There, as explored by Wallace in *Melville and Turner*, three “lines,” which turn out to be masts, can just be made out, as if “floating in a nameless yeast” (Melville 1988, 12).

Here, though, through complex reaction to clearly individualized portraits and the tradition of religious hagiography, Melville reaches beyond an *aesthetic of the indistinct* to incorporate distinct, overlapping registers of visual allusion. If, in chapter nineteen, the look in Billy’s eyes presents “as a crucifixion to behold,” chapter twenty-four returns to this direct allusion and subjects it to thick description (46).

A detail from the margin of the widely circulated lithographic print of *The Death of Nelson* condenses in visual form much of what I have discussed above. At the bottom left Nelson stands in his “jeweled vouchers” before a dark-skinned sailor. Above them, perhaps cut away by shot in battle, swings a block. In the smoke of battle Nelson stands calmly, commandingly, in his hand a spot-glass, meant to symbolize the martial oversight of genius that Clausewitz called *coup d’oeil*. A ghostly anchor chain can just be made out leading up to Nelson’s foot, formally tying into the shape of the buckle of his shoe. He is secure, says this visual pun; Nelson is reason’s calm answer to the fog-of-war. Or perhaps Arthur Devis (or more likely the engraver, J. Rogers) means to play on Nelson’s famous near-final command about anchoring his fleet in the tempest that
followed Trafalgar. As Beatty first recorded, Nelson says to his captain, “Anchor, Hardy, anchor,” and then, after failing to raise his paralyzed lower body, says “Do you anchor.” Then, fearing himself imbued with the repeating fate of every anchor, Nelson says to Hardy “Don’t throw me overboard.” He wants to “be buried with his parents, unless it should please the king to order otherwise” (Southey 283). This gentlemen’s worries are real, and I would not diminish them, but they are not the same as Billy’s.

22 I cannot exhaust Melville’s reformations of the Nelson archive here, so will instead extend to speculation concerning how one properly grotesque margin in The Death of Nelson may have resonated with Melville in the making of Billy Budd. The figure of a wounded marine dominates the lower right of the painting. Like Billy he is scarcely illuminated (Melville 2017, 61). Like Billy, this figure is set apart. His back is turned to Nelson, and it is hard to discern the nature of his affect. Though we might assume that he is overcome with grief at Nelson’s death, in the light of Billy Budd he may as easily be struggling with his own pain, seeking to master his exhaustion, trying to come to terms with his impending death, or resigned in thought. When we turn from the finished canvas to the correlate detail in the Windsor Castle oil sketch, we find that his face is a blank.13 To Devis he was not a personage that could sit for a likeness in the central, unfolding, inside narrative of hierarchical power he sought to tell, but rather a common type. The shadows suit him, where his face, obscured by his hand, could be more easily generalized. In Devis’s first, exploratory pencil drawing for the canvas, he has inverted the marine, who looks away from the viewer, obviating the need for giving him any face at all.14 The sketch shows Devis trying to work out the problem of this anonymous everyman; he draws him twice, garnering as much space and attention as the central figures. Like Melville’s Billy, Devis’s wounded marine impinges on the privileged story of maritime power’s just succession. In the light of Billy, he reminds us of the general suffering in war that happens unlit by fame and power. Again, it is pure speculation to assert that this figure caught Melville’s eye. We can be certain of figures Melville did know that share with the wounded marine a great deal in their formal composition and meaning: e.g. the enchained prisoners in the Liverpool Nelson Monument, but especially The Dying Gladiator, which Melville knew well before he saw it in Rome’s Capitoline Museum in 1857 and reflected upon in his lecture, “Statues in Rome.”15

23 In chapter thirty, when Billy is hanged, when he “[takes] the full rose of the dawn,” Melville engages with a constellation of Nelson art that extends from Arthur Devis into an archive this essay only begins to consider (124). Nelson’s life and death may have democratized English aristocracy, but the common circulation of Billy as jewel takes that slight levelling gesture far deeper into the life of the people. Unlike Nelson, Billy can only survive in the people’s memory through “ragged” circulation and “rude” publication (69, 71). In contrast to the Nelson legacy, nostalgia for Billy Budd involves a tragic loss of provenance.

24 The Nelson archive is both diffuse—like the whale it is everywhere—and of quite secure provenance; its aspects are “fast fish” (Melville 1988, 396), housed in The Greenwich Maritime Museum, the Queen’s Royal Collection, and in libraries, archives, and museums around the world. After Melville encountered Arthur Devis’s The Death of Nelson at Greenwich in 1849 he considered other Nelson sources—in marble, in paint, in print, or as prints derived from paintings—right up until his death. I have argued that Melville’s late return to the Nelson archive should inform our understanding of his late
skepticism regarding hero worship, something we tend to approach by way of his late reading, for example in Schopenhauer, but it should be informed as well by his lifelong habit of looking. The Nelson archive reveals Melville coevally building and disassembling, or building in order to disassemble our confidence in established Romantic verities—fame, honor, and the uses of representative men. Though cloaked as nostalgic reflection on the time before steam ships, and inspired by hagiographic art from the age of sail, Melville’s still Romantic art in *Billy Budd* teeters on the cusp of Realism. The representational clarity of Devis’s art and the scientific clarity of Beatty’s matter-of-fact reportage in representing the death of England’s secular saint, brought Melville to the cusp of the new. The suspension and careful collapse of sacred beings in Melville’s late writing does not re-inscribe the divine into the natural supernatural. That would be the typological poetics practiced by a more confidently aristocratic romantic, and Melville was no such writer. Instead, the unmolding of exceptionalism in *Billy Budd* is at once more humble and more radical. Abstractly considered, the productive space between the death of Nelson and of Billy exposes Melville’s concern for the necessary fragility of any truly democratic forms of life. Melville’s rewriting of the Nelson story as “no romance,” his leveling of hierarchy, pulls both figures down to where they share in each other’s annihilation and apotheosis. In Billy, Melville refracts Nelson reliquary formations to shine a dim light far from England, toward flickering democratic possibilities in the sadly unreconstructed America that he faced in his last years.

25 Billy is the perfect, alienated subject of history. If, in capitalist systems, alienation most broadly describes our being as self-estranged, *reification* names that aspect of alienation where our human, existentialist suffering becomes visible in aesthetic form. In rhetorical terms, reification is the opposite of *prosopopoeia*—it is not the attribution of personality to the inanimate, animal, abstract, or congregate, but rather those patterns of literary conversion where in mimesis the impersonated has its face stripped away and is reformed as a thing, or series of things. In Melville’s reification poetics the necessary duplicates, Nelson and Billy, both diminish. They are broken up into pieces by Melville’s imagination, but in such a way that they maintain their larger movement through Melville’s fictive world, so that the motion of the things they become is not stripped away in this de-personalization effect. We see this in peculiar textual moments reminiscent of Nelson’s spinal paralysis as described by Dr. Beatty. As if pinned to that trauma we encounter in *Billy Budd* a series of rigid bodies call attention to themselves: the corpse of Claggart falling “over lengthwise, like a heavy plank tilted from erectness,” or Billy, rising, in whom, “to the wonder of all no motion was apparent,” or Vere, who “[stands] erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorer’s rack” at the moment of Billy’s execution (65).

26 The reason Billy transforms into a jewel-block, then, is on one level straightforward. The “gifted” “foretopman” who gives “rude utterance” to Billy’s story just wants to possess his friend in memory a bit longer, something easier with relics (71). This desire is shared by the narrator, an old salt reflecting in “the compositional present” of retirement, as John Wenke has recently noticed (231). But the ballad also transforms Billy into the working tackle of the ship, where, as in chapter twenty-four, his singular memory risks becoming lost within a larger visual series of sea and battle pieces. From there, since a version of the ballad including its jewel was written before the prose headnote expanded, and like some piece of “The Temeraire,” Billy can break-up into other humble, portable things—an ear-ring, a pearl, a chip of the spar from which he
once hung. And these things, not unlike Melville’s other late works, are coterie productions—precious in circulation to a few, but still capable of catching on, as literary history has borne out. Still, in the end, we are lucky to have *Billy Budd*, even in his fluid, refractory pieces.

27 Melville’s late work, with the reduction in scale apparent also in *Weeds and Wildings*, stands in stark opposition, for example, to Whitman’s late reification poetics, where a cosmic juggernaut—Walt—delights through revision after revision to be barnacled all over with people and things. Instead, Melville “restricts [...] to the inner life” of an “individual,” near-anonymous “handsome sailor” in subjection to power. Under the self-imported pressure of looming hagiographic Nelson sources, and through historical digressions, even as proximate stories press down on Billy concerning what Barbara Johnson once called the other two “men in [the] boat” (567)—Claggart and Vere—Melville keeps true to the tragic career of this single figure, displacing and reforming Nelson worship to foreground a flawed representative of the “People”—the common crew—men whose murmurous, inarticulate voice after the hanging reform Billy’s equivocal defect as stifled revolutionary inkling.

28 The critical difference between Nelson and Billy is the difference between action and intention on the one hand, and passivity and acquiescence on the other, a difference also traceable within Melville’s inventive use of the Nelson archive. As I have shown, Devis’s canvas purports to capture the instant of Nelson’s secular apotheosis; we have traced it in the painting to the luminous continuance of the chain-of-command—from Nelson up to the person—and to the forehead—of Hardy. In Southey’s *Life*, Nelson secures his intention to martyr himself for state continuity even before his death, through prolepsis reminiscent of Hamlet’s famous words to Horatio; Nelson says not “I am dead, Horatio” but “I am a dead man, Hardy” (5.2.311, 282). In contrast, *Billy Budd* displaces intentionality into the narrator’s imagining, where Billy appears “in effect [...] already in his shroud” (61).

29 Yet in the end Melville’s ekphrastic maneuvers within the Nelson Archive do not signal ironic equivalency between Nelson and Billy; Billy cannot be converted into a simple voucher of the people, a thing hanging in subjection from the silk-lined breast of the great man’s coat. Writing insightfully of Billy’s death to condition the resistance school of *Billy Budd* scholarship, Nathan Wolff argues that “Billy’s revolutionary potential hinges on his being expendable”—on his acquiescence to death. In a section of his essay titled “Baby Budd Goes to Sleep,” Wolff argues that “sleep” is an unsatisfying trope for death, revealing the closing verse unwilling “to convince us that its view of death is plausible; rather,” he writes, in this way “[the poem] lends its support for Billy’s conviction by the drumhead court” (14). But a critical bypath from our main road further conditions Wolff’s point, and reminds us why Melville drew this trope, and even the words “I am sleepy” directly from Shakespeare.

30 In stage StBb of his fluid manuscript, Melville amended the last line of “Darbies” from: “I am drowzy [sic]” to “I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist” (542). At some undetermined point after he “chanc[ed] to fall in with” his Hilliard & Gray Shakespeare, Melville marked and annotated three passages in *Measure for Measure* concerning sleep and execution (Melville 1993, 119). The first, near the beginning of act III, relates the Duke’s attempts to convince Claudio that he should not expect a pardon, but should prepare to die: “Thy best of rest is sleep, / And that thou oft provok’st; yet grossly fear’st / Thy death, which is no more.” At the bottom of this page
Melville wrote “Our little life is rounded by a sleep’ Tempest.” In act IV Melville enclosed a passage where the Clown says to Barnardine: “You must rise and be hanged!” Barnardine replies: “Away, you rogue, away; I am sleepy.” On the facing page he scored and x’d the Clown’s punning reply to Barnardine’s complaint that he is too hung over to rise. The Clown says “[...] he that drinks all night, and is hanged betimes in the morning, may sleep the sounder all the next day.” At the top of the page, in commentary keyed to these pages, Melville wrote: “Take this, and other texts with the one comprehensive one in The Tempest, I think, ‘Our little life is rounded with a sleep’” (MMO Seals No. 460. 1.369, 1.396-397). What matters is that the comic, dismissible paroles of the sleep=death trope rebound for Melville from the verbal play in Measure, and even from Ariel’s manipulative “sleep” in The Tempest, to Prospero’s more mystical, “comprehensive” sleep, which I would argue Melville does not read as imagined death, but as the blank, terrifying, unknowable state of dreamless non-being that precedes and follows life—a “strange” de-ontologized state that refuses Romance, and thereby the mystical apotheosis of Nelson, or of Billy, who, we recall, “ascending, [takes] the full rose of the dawn” (65). Where Nelson implores his body’s handlers not to throw him overboard, Billy’s verse handler imagines his friend’s body sinking “fathoms down” within a natural shroud of “oozy weeds,” awash in lyric strains that, while they might not insulate him from sleep as non-being, nevertheless transport him beyond the rituals of state preservation, which for Nelson involved the horror of being pickled in brandy (72). Billy’s sleepy acquiescence to death in the ballad may signal Melville’s conception of democracy as “a precarious social form defined by antagonism and a necessary instability or incompleteness,” but the contradictory readings of “sleep” available to the ballad—as simultaneously shallow (unsatisfying) and deep (primordial, “oozy”)—mark Billy’s body as indeterminately transmuted into a thing beyond resistance to or acquiescence within the paroles of power—adding a little lower, and very Melvillean layer to the author’s fluid and finally unfathomable literary remains (Wolff 20, note 6).

I have essayed to show that attention to the Beatty/Devis aspects of the Nelson archive help us see more clearly how Billy Budd twists significant outside visual narratives of hierarchy, duty, sacrifice, and apotheosis, refracting the designs of reliquary art from “time before steamships” in order to confront “the risks inherent in a form of politics that [insistently re]locates authority in the people [but] without assurance of their virtue or reason” (3, Wolff 5). By destabilizing the measured forms of Romanticism’s hagiography industry, Melville’s reliquary reformations suggest the instability of democratic being in the compositional present of the late 19th century, even as these altered forms quietly allow us to mourn the breaking up of one common sailor into the gigantic machinery of an un-reconstructed state on the verge of global ambition.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


**NOTES**

1. The Greenwich canvas is Turner’s second treatment of this historical theme. Readers can inspect the canvas in detail online via open access Collections at Royal Museums Greenwich. N.d. Accessed 2 September 2022.

<https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-12057>.

2. This complex grouping was designed by Mathew Cotes Wyatt and sculpted by Richard Westmacott. It is now altered, restored, and relocated from the place where Melville saw it in 1849 and in 1857. N.d. Accessed 2 September 2022.


3. The painting titled *The Death of Nelson*, by Arthur William Devis, can be viewed and inspected in great detail online via open access Collections at Royal Museums Greenwich. I invite readers to do that before reading further. N.d. Accessed 2 September 2022.

<https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/14367.html>.

4. This volume is freely available for inspection online at the Harvard Library Viewer. N.d. Accessed 2 September 2022.


5. The ball that killed Nelson can be viewed at The Royal Collection Trust © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021. The Nelson Bullet 1805: Lead, silk, silver, glass, gilt metal. 5.0 x 7.5 x 2.0 cm (whole object). RCIN 61158. N.d. Accessed 2 September 2022.


7. Seeking to explain Melville’s failure to even mention Turner in *Moby-Dick* (a real inconvenience for a book on the two artists together, especially where there is no evidence of Turner having known Melville’s work), Robert Wallace crafted a footnote that reads in part: “it is [...] possible that Melville wished to keep his debt to Turner covert” (Wallace 1985, 19). While the same might be said of Melville’s debt to Devis, the larger point is that Melville’s artistic practice, while ever attuned to the value of the sister arts, often featured the near complete absorption and overwriting of visual sources. Even in rare situations declaring themselves directly ekphrastic, like “Formerly a Slave,” or “The Coming Storm,” in *Battle-Pieces*, verse meditations upon works by Elihu Vedder and Stanford Gifford, respectively, the source art is catalytic; it is honored by Melville, but as a pivot that slingshots his imagination beyond the inspiration.


11. For the most thorough assessment of how meditation on natural law in Melville’s novella opens up to “an alternative politics” destabilizing “the absoluteness of the necessity of violence” for justice (121), see Phillip Loosemore’s essay, “Revolution, Counterrevolution, and Natural Law in ‘Billy Budd, Sailor.’”


15. For a thoughtful consideration of the resonance of *The Dying Gladiator* in Melville’s fiction, see Berthold 108-11.

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**ABSTRACTS**

recentering critical attention upon under-explored textual and visual Horatio Nelson sources—especially *The Authentic Narrative of the Death of Lord Nelson* by Dr. William Beatty and *The Death of Nelson* by the portrait painter, Arthur William Devis—this essay argues that the Nelson/Billy analogy must join the Nelson/Vere analogy if we are to more fully appreciate the genesis,
ekphrastic aesthetics, and indeterminate political tenor of *Billy Budd, Sailor*. In reaction to Beatty and Devis Melville redeploy his commitment to Turner’s “aesthetic of the indistinct” with new attention to manipulating the distinct details of power dynamics as evidenced in group portraiture. Melville’s creative appropriations from and distortions of the Nelson Archive allows him to overflow the formal expectations of veneration within the secular hagiography industry and to subtly address the precarity of democratic life in the compositional present of the late 19th century.


INDEX

*Mots-clés:* esthétique, mort, démocratie, ekphrasis, hagiographie, portrait  
*Keywords:* aesthetics, death, democracy, ekphrasis, hagiography, portraiture

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