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*Pernelle Beatrix***ALTERITY IN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE: THE FACES OF  
THE OTHER IN MELVILLE'S  
MOBY-DICK AND BILLY BUDD****Pernelle Beatrix,***PhD, Associate Professor*

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E-mail: *Beatrix.PERNELLE@unice.fr***ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the question of the expression of alterity as “faces” in Herman Melville’s two masterpieces, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* and *Billy Budd, Sailor*. The issue of otherness and the relationships between subjects stands as a major problem in literature, but also in philosophy and ethics, as it also logically entails a questioning about identity and sameness. The analysis uses the concepts of face from the phenomenological point of view of Emmanuel Levinas, but also that of faciality developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The difficulty, or even impossibility to reach the Other who stands as pure exteriority in a nonreciprocal relationship leads to a number of communication deadlocks, that language itself cannot solve as the deadly face-to-face in *Billy Budd* makes it clear. The traditional vision of the western philosophy of representation, based on the Greek model ruled by the idea of the Same and identity must be therefore left and redefined in order to take into account the pure exteriority of the other.

**Key words:** alterity ; *Billy Budd*; face; identity Herman Melville; *Moby-Dick*; Other.

## INTRODUCTION

The question of alterity and the relationship to the Other appears in different ways and in a variety of fields, such as art, medicine, anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics, philosophy, theology, ethics, language and literature. But whatever the discipline, the evocation of alterity immediately entails the question of the relationship with the Other, or others, most often in connection with ethics, even though this subject can also be studied through a phenomenological approach. This relationship and the complex intricacies it causes affects the issue of representation, an obviously central point in literature.

In the major literary texts in which alterity manifests itself, the main question that arises logically is: how can we consider the other? The aim of this paper is to explore otherness as it appears in two major fictions by H. Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Billy Budd* (published in 1924), using the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas's works *Totality and Infinity – An Essay on externality* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. (1990), as well as the approach of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2: A Thousand Plateaus* (1972). The term “face” used for this analysis must be understood according to the definition given by the two authors in the mentioned works.

### 1 - Faciality and otherness; the Other (“Autre”) and the other (“autrui”)

The Other is not necessarily an Other, but “others” involved in a love/hate relationship. As Jean-Luc Marion points it, the etymology of the term indicates that the other (“Autrui”) derives from an alteration of “alter”, in other words, it results from the addition of a dative (attribution) to the “other”.

But according to Levinas, this is a non-reciprocal relationship, where the identity of the subject, considered as “I” (in the nominative case) has to be set in the accusative: in the thought of the philosopher, the subject “I” has to answer for the other, which implies a notion of responsibility. The result is a fundamental passivity of the subject, who can not “receive” the other from a basis it would assume in advance, because it is always already called or inspired by the other. The subject is then in the position of passive exposure to others, in a movement in which the

subject who is affected by others builds itself by the same assignment. This exposure to Others will be referred to as “The Saying without the Said” (that is to say below any *Said*) in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, a situation which seems to correspond to that of Melville's *Billy Budd*, a character exposed to different faces of Others including that of the Master at Arms Claggart in the fatal face-to-face.

### *How does the other manifest itself?*

There are different “names” for the other, if indeed it can be named at all. “Face” is one of these names (used by Deleuze, Levinas), or “trace” in *Otherwise than Being*; it may also be called Saying (which then equates “face”, “passivity”, “diachrony”) vs Said, like writing, synchrony, history, or “trace of God” (the notion of “trace” in Derrida, “writing and differance” was inspired by Levinas). The face is that by which we recognize the other, that by which it reveals itself to us. It appears as the condition of possibility of intersubjectivities and should, as such, remain visible and legible.

The question of visibility, of “Seeing” must then be broached, as well as the issue of intersubjectivity.

### *Seeing the other*

We will start from the concept of “faciality” (Deleuze) to study the human face, not as a natural given, but as a semiotic construction. Face and “faciality” affect other concepts, in particular:

1. The “savage”, as an ethical or scientific concept, which considers the face as the site of a socio-ethical expression, as for instance *Moby-Dick*'s Queequeg, a perfect embodiment of the savage for the white narrator Ishmael.

2. Subjectivity, as expressed by the face, as a phenomenal evidence of the subjectivity of others, and whose relation to subjectivity constitutes a main issue in XXth century French phenomenology. In that case, “face” is not to be regarded as a reflection of the soul, nor does it take any special meaning.

3. Phenomenality and its limits: Consequently, to what extent can a phenomenon be called a “face”? What and/or who can be referred to as such?

### **I - The idol and the icon: eidolon vs eikon, Moby-Dick and the idolator**

The questions of the Face and of the Other inevitably lead to the larger notion of visibility,

especially when addressing the issue of the absolute Other (“God”) and of the irreducible distance that characterizes it, which can be called exteriority. Visibility and its corollary, vision, appear as prominent concepts which in turn involve the central notions of the idol and the icon, two crucial yet distinct terms that will be used in our study.

The distinction between eidolon and eikon stems from etymology: both words are formed on the same root, but only eidolon falls within the sphere of the visible because it is formed on a theme that expresses the idea of seeing (from the Greek verb *idein* “see”, and *eidos*, the name that applies to the first visible appearance). On the other hand, *eikon* relates to the root *weik*, indicating suitability or appropriateness (for instance like the adjective *eikelos*, “similar”)

The different values of the words clearly lead to an opposition between the *eidolon*, as a copy of sensitive appearance, and the *eikon*, the transposition of essence. The *eidolon* and its model rest on the identity of surface and meaning, while the relationship between the *eikon* and what it represents lies at the level of the deep structure and of the signified.

Tradition has eventually reduced the visible *eidolon* to pure appearance, and thus applies to gods that exist only in their image, while *eikon* is reserved for the representations of God (icons). So that the Idol finally corresponds to what is seen, what is visible; but the divine idol implies distance, as J-L Marion remarks: “The idol attempts to bring us close to the divine and to appropriate it to us.” [8, P 7]; The idol gives us an idolatrous face of God, but this face is man-made, in keeping with the human experience of the divine, and actually refers to this type of experience and not to the Being or essence. In other words the idol aims to reduce the gap and the withdrawal of the divine; then the radical otherness, the irreducible exteriority of the other is canceled, as the idol eliminates the “irrefutable otherness which, properly, attests the divine “ as Marion affirms: “The idol lacks the distance that identifies and authenticates the divine as such – as what does not belong to us but befalls us”. [8, PP.7-8].

The irreducible distance with the Other entails a number of major issues that affect the question of representation in literature, and

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* specifically devotes several chapters to the impossible depiction of the white whale. But at the beginning of the monstrous book, chapter 3 “The Spouter Inn” already introduces this question, through the “wild”, apparently terrifying character of Queequeg. This chapter describes the first meeting between Ishmael the narrator (American, white and Christian) and the strange barbarian whose body is covered with tattoos, and who peddles shrunken heads when ashore. Queequeg embodies the “savage”, the “pagan”, the Other par excellence, and first produces a reaction of terror and rejection from the part of Ishmael. Forced to share a room, and even his bed with that character, the young narrator is already in bed, late at night, when Queequeg eventually arrives, and engages in a curious ritual which can be described as an “idolatrous ritual”, actually a prayer to his dark wooden “idol”:

*I now screwed my eyes hard towards the half hidden image, feeling but ill at ease meantime—to see what was next to follow. First he takes about a double handful of shavings out of his grego pocket, and places them carefully before the idol; then laying a bit of ship biscuit on top and applying the flame from the lamp, he kindled the shavings into a sacrificial blaze. Presently, after many hasty snatches into the fire, and still hastier withdrawals of his fingers (whereby he seemed to be scorching them badly), he at last succeeded in drawing out the biscuit; then blowing off the heat and ashes a little, he made a polite offer of it to the little negro. But the little devil did not seem to fancy such dry sort of fare at all; he never moved his lips. All these strange antics were accompanied by still stranger guttural noises from the devotee, who seemed to be praying in a sing-song or else singing some pagan psalmody or other, during which his face twitched about in the most unnatural manner. At last extinguishing the fire, he took the idol up very unceremoniously, and bagged it again in his grego pocket as carelessly as if he were a sportsman bagging a dead woodcock. [10, P. 30]* The description points to a “strange”, grotesque ritual, in which the “face” that appears is that of the human, barbaric and wild as it may be, without any distance, in a roughness brought by familiarity; as “the half hidden picture “ shows, it is a mere image, a dis-

torted appearance (“a curious little deformed image”) that Ishmael quickly identifies as “nothing but a wooden idol”. Unsurprisingly, in chapter 16 the idol becomes a “god” named “Yojo” who plays the part of an oracle supposed to guide Queequeg in selecting the ship he will embark on. Here again, Ishmael humorously underlines the comic inadequacy of the relationship between God and the idol, “*a rather good sort of god, who perhaps meant well enough upon the whole, but in all cases did not succeed in his benevolent designs.*” [10, P.66]

The essence of the icon is obviously completely different, but we may wonder what thing or being does the icon offer the face of. The Bible mentions “the image of the invisible God” (Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature”. (*Colossians* I, 15) The Bible, King James Version), a religious icon, i.e the representation of a face in which the eyes play a prominent part for in that case, it is a face who gazes at me, as philosopher Jean-Luc Marion states it:

“The icon manifests neither the human face, nor the divine nature that no one would be able to envisage, but, theologians of the icon would say, the relationship of the one to the other (...) The icon conceals and reveals that on which it is based: the gap between the divine and his face.” [8, P.23]

The icon corresponds to the visibility of the invisible, a visibility where the invisible is to be seen as such and which definitely does not seek to abolish the distance. “The icon properly manifests the nuptial distance that weds, without confusing, the visible and the invisible -- that is, the human and the divine.” [8, P. 26]

The novel *Moby-Dick* devotes several chapters to this question (a crucial one in the study of the problem of representation), especially when it comes to portray (“*without brushes or canvas*”) the mythical monster, and the difficulty- if not the impossibility- of this task rapidly appears. Starting with the always “approximate”, oblique, evocation of the “face” of *Moby-Dick* (called “Sphynx”, “mystic” or “mysterious” in the book) the narrator realizes immediately the impossibility of such representations, mainly because of the essential invisibility of the white whale, as whale hunting amounts to an attempt to approach the alterity and various modes of the other.

Chapters 55 and 56 of *Moby-Dick* expose the impossibility of reaching any satisfactory representation, that is to say an iconic one, capable of conveying the essence of the Same (of *Moby-Dick*, or the Absolute Other). As a matter of fact, only erroneous monstrous pictures of the Whale have been achieved, as the etymology of the Monster seems to imply. It relates to “demonstration”, it shows, but remains within the domain of appearance, of the visible, without accessing essence, in other words, it remains an idol: *True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like.* [10, P.228]

The only way to reach a satisfactory result is to experience a physical encounter with the monster : “*And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him.*” [10, P.228]

It is a risky business, whose major danger lies in encountering the Other and the Face, deliberately or accidentally, as seems to suggest the episode of Pip, who survived after falling overboard during a lowering but whose spirit seems disturbed forever after the unfortunate episode. After his wreck, Pip has turned into a “fool”, he has seen the forbidden “face” of God, becoming himself “altered” yet an “idiot” after his contemplation, or perhaps revelation “of God-omnipresent” : “*He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.*” [10, P. 93] (Cf The Bible King James Version, *Exodus*, 33:20:” And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.”)

It seems that Pip faced absolute otherness, God in his radical exteriority, in a direct and therefore violent encounter with a face which brings us back to the thought of E. Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, where God stands as the epitome of the Unreachable Other, and whose direct contemplation is impossible.



### **Face and exteriority**

Meeting the other face-to-face is the starting point of the ethical relationship for E. Levinas. This relationship to the Other is in fact a relation to the absolutely other, an encounter with an unrepresentable face or unknown language.

The other, in his absolute singularity, always escapes me: I am "never close enough," in the words of Levinas. The way the other occurs to me, escaping me by facing me, is called "face" in the philosopher's system.

But thematizing the face, that is to say giving him features, means already disfiguring him. Of course this face is not limited to aesthetics, to the features of the face or to its face. For Levinas, the only possible meeting is the encounter with the manifestation of the other in the face, but not with the other since a direct encounter is impossible: "If we could possess, grasp and know each other, it would not be another." [8, P.83]; there would not even be any phenomenology of the face, since logically there must be first a phenomenon beforehand. Therefore, if the sperm whale is the Other, the "face" should be the face of the whale, considered as the irreducible Other. And indeed, *Moby-Dick* does not have any proper "features": "*For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper (...)*" [10, P.292]

Any "depiction" or representation is then impossible, and nobody ever tried to achieve it, as the opening lines of chapter 79 make it clear. The sperm whale is definitely an unfathomable enigma that no Champollion could decipher, and Ishmael's project may seem somewhat pretentious since any attempt to represent the face of Whale is doomed to failure.

### **II - Faciality: the beautiful face of the savage**

The notion of "face" leads to that of faciality as expressed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a concept which in turn involves the notions of savage and norm. Deleuze and Guattari propose a genealogical study of these concepts, so as to consider the face not as a phenomenological given but as a type of coding of the expressions of the human head specific to Western cultures:

"The face is not a universal. It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes.

The face is Christ. The face is the typical European, what Ezra Pound called the average sensual man, in short, the ordinary everyday Erotomaniac (nineteenth-century psychiatrists were right to say that erotomania, unlike nymphomania, often remains pure and chaste; this is because it operates through the face and facialization). Not a universal, but fades totius universi. Jesus Christ superstar: he invented the facialization of the entire body and spread it everywhere (the Passion of Joan of Arc, in close-up). Thus the face is by nature an entirely specific idea, which did not preclude its acquiring and exercising the most general of functions: the function of biunivocalization, or binarization. It has two aspects: the abstract machine of faciality, insofar as it is composed by a black hole/white wall system, functions in two ways, one of which concerns the units or elements, the other the choices. Under the first aspect, the black hole acts as a central computer, Christ, the third eye that moves across the wall or the white screen serving as general surface of reference. Regardless of the content one gives it, the machine constitutes a facial unit, an elementary face in biunivocal relation with another: it is a man or a woman, a rich person or a poor one, an adult or a child, a leader or a subject, "an x or a y." [2, PP. 176-177]

They re-defined the face as the result of a "faciality", that is to say, the result, historically dated, of the meeting of three layers: First, an organic level, when a part of the body (here the head) makes it signify. Secondly, a signifying layer which assigns a specific meaning to the elements described. Third, a subjective layer, which considers the face as the expression of an individual consciousness.

However a relation between facial features and the signified cannot be denied, and it must be noted that faciality leads to the creation of "types", then to the establishment of standards and norms, which in turn may entail a close connection with the political sphere. The arrangement of these three strata is called the "abstract machine of faciality" by Deleuze and Guattari.

It seems that Melville's *Moby-Dick* somehow broaches the issue of "faciality", more particularly through the evocation of the face of Queequeg the "savage", regarded as an ethical or scientific concept. This paradigm considers the face as a place of socio-ethical expression which con-

veys the contrast between the smooth/striated spaces and the interplay of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. Still according to Deleuze and Guattari, the maritime model exposes the complex opposition between smooth and striated spaces : the authors suggest several other types, including that of the fabric (i.e. the striated space) vs the smooth space of felt, an “anti-fabric” randomly intertwining fibers and defined as “in principle infinite”, capable of spreading in every direction.

“Felt is a supple solid product that proceeds altogether differently, as an anti-fabric. It implies no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibers (...) An aggregate of intrication of this kind is in no way homogeneous: it is nevertheless smooth, and contrasts point by point with the space of fabric (it is in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation)”. [2, P. 476]

Another opposition of concepts associated with the technological model of the fabric is also mentioned, that of embroidery (striated space) and the patchwork (smooth space) so typical of American culture. A similar model appears in the text of Melville, especially when the narrator comes to discuss his meeting with the terrifying savage who shares his room at “The Spouter Inn” in chapter 3.

The first meeting with the South Sea harpooner, previously introduced as a head peddler and idolatrous pagan lost in the very Christian community of New Bedford, New England, already reflects the opposition : governed by the rules of Puritan morality and by the laws of the whaling trade that sustain it, the highly normalized city constitutes a type of striated space, against which the very special “face” of the savage Queequeg stands out most conspicuously. Ishmael does not immediately perceive it as such, and the narrator’s long waiting in the darkness of the room brutally ends with the shock of the sight he finally sees; what he discovers is not a “face” properly speaking, it is first of all a disconcerting and utterly frightening “head”: *His bald purplish head now looked for all the world like a mildewed skull.* [10, P. 28]

According to G. Deleuze, “the head, even the human head, is not necessarily a face.” [2, P. 170]

; the concept of face stems from what Deleuze calls “the abstract machine of faciality”, that is to say an assembling and social production of significance corresponding in fact to the western face of the white and Christian man: “The face is Christ. The face is the typical European”; (...) This is a bi-univocalization, or binarization. “[2, P. 170] The striating and criss-crossing power of faciality is clear; it orders a normality away from which all those who cannot be considered as Man, White, and Christian constitute a deviance.

At that point in the text, this is indeed what Queequeg emblemizes in the eyes of the narrator since the frightening character concentrates all the oppositions and deviances that have just been mentioned: Christian/pagan; white man/Dark skin; Civilization/Wild; New Bedford/South Seas. The description of the harpooner becomes then more accurate, and finally focuses on a face that does not meet the standards of the white man: *it was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck over with large, blackish looking squares. (..) They were some stains of some sort or other.* [10, P. 28].

After a moment of surprise, Ishmael realizes that the whole body of Queequeg is also covered by the same colorful patterns, which he eventually identifies as tattoos: “ (...) *these covered parts of him were checkered with the same squares as his face ; his back, too, was all over the same dark squares(...)* Still more, *his very legs were marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms. It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whale-man in the South seas, and so landed in a Christian country.*” [10, PP. 29-30]

In fact the whole body can be “contaminated” by the facialization process, or on the contrary, as is the case here, completely deviate from it. As Ishmael decides to refuse faciality too, his appreciation of the “cannibal” shifts to a complete reversal of his initial impression; the savage now becomes “courteous”, “kind” and even “charitable: “ *for all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely cannibal “, a statement that the narrator concludes with a surprising” better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian “.* [10, P. 31]

The strange patterns covering Queequeg’s body also suggest another smooth space, the

patchwork model, mentioned by Deleuze in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In Chapter 4, aptly entitled "The Counterpane", Melville's fiction associates to the savage a patchwork bedspread, specifically crafted using the technique of "quilt": "*The counterpane was of patchwork, full of odd little parti-coloured squares and triangles ; and this arm of his tattooed all over (...) looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt.*" [10, P.32]

Now, the patchwork, made of "successive additions of fabric" is an informal space where there is no center; it is "an amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways." [2, P.476]. But Queequeg comes to literally merge with the bedspread (which also happens to be a quilt), which also offers a possibility that there may be neither top nor bottom. This shows a high degree of affinity with nomadism, as if a smooth space came out of a striated space, as if the checkered body, striated with tattoos, "de-facialized itself" before opening onto a smooth space, inseparably linked to movement, and an onto a rhizomic organization in which flux leads to creative lines of deterritorialization. As Ishmael remarks, Queequeg seems bound to change in nature and undergo a metamorphosis: "*[he] was a creature in the transition state -neither caterpillar nor butterfly. He was just civilized enough to show his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner.*" [10, P. 34]

And indeed, Queequeg appears to be somewhat "strange, "outlandish", both "barbaric" and bizarre. In Chapter 12, devoted to his biography, the reader learns that in the eyes of his family, his stay in the Christian world makes the savage unfit to access an otherwise legitimate throne, but the 'Christian world "does not regard him as "civilized "!

As for Ishmael, he decides to take a path seemingly opposed to the ethos of the Christian world he belongs to and adopts the cannibal's hideous face, to which he feels irresistibly attracted: "*Wild he was ; a very sight of sights to see ; yet I began to feel myself mysteriously drawn towards him. And those same things that would have repelled most others, they were the very magnets that thus drew me.*" [10, P. 53].

This concept of faciality also appears in *Billy Budd*, through the noticeable and radical al-

teration of the main character : after murdering Claggart and being sentenced to death, the young "Handsome Sailor", the former jewel of the British Navy previously and unanimously considered as innocent and profoundly moral ("*The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make*" [9, P. 431] radically changes status. Indeed, Billy Budd's perfect indifference to the pious words of the Chaplain come to comfort him on his last night before the execution, results in his "downgrading" to the rank of barbarian: "*in vain the good Chaplain sought to impress the young barbarian with ideas of death akin to those conveyed in the skull, dial, and cross-bones on old tombstones; equally futile to all appearance were his efforts to bring home to him the thought of salvation and a Saviour.*" [9, P. 495]. As the young foretopman evinces little – if any- of the emotion or decorous behaviour expected from a White Man/ Christian, it can only be because he has become a "savage" : "*And this sailor-way of taking clerical discourse is not wholly unlike the way in which the pioneer of Christianity full of transcendent miracles was received long ago on tropic isles by any superior savage so called.*" [9, P. 495].

### III - Billy Budd or the impossible confrontation

Melville's last text - posthumously published - mainly revolves around the problematic relationship to the other, which can be addressed from the perspective of alterity, as Levinas's analyzes it in *Otherwise Than Being*. The status and definition of the Other need to be clarified in this theory : standing as a figure that appears in face-to-face encounters, facing the face of the other, the other assigns me to responsibility, and even persecutes me, a situation that appears to be that of the famous "Handsome Sailor" in Melville's novella.

The philosophical concept of responsibility is designated by Levinas by a noun corresponding to the verb "to answer", in the double significance of "answering to" and "answering for". Others appeal to me. And it is in response to this call that I am me, to the point of existing in the accusative : "Here I am", Levinas says. Exposed to the other and to its violence, Billy Budd must actually "answer to" (before "answering for") the other, or rather the face of the Other embodied by the Master at Arms and the Captain of the



ship in the famous confrontation scene; but first the young sailor shows a total inability to speak (and therefore to answer), a main expression of his passivity conveyed through the typical stutter which afflicts him in the emotionally intense situations. In such circumstances, he is absolutely unable to reply and defend himself, which leaves him no choice but to kill Claggart during the deadly face-to-face of Chapter 19. The Master-at-arms appears here as essentially different, an irreducible figure of the outside termed as "face" by Levinas. It is only with the manifestation of his face that this irreducible other shows his presence in an "epiphany" that Levinas calls "face": Coming from the other side of being, it stands as a revelation of an other world, absolutely outside and above me, and above Billy Budd. Claggart seems to be here an "outside", an "other", a threatening face, the stranger with whom it is impossible to establish a relationship, with whom there is an "infinite distance" never reducible to the domain of the same and which therefore constitutes an absolute difference: "In speech, it is the outside, that speaks in giving rise to speech, and permitting me to speak" Blanchot writes [1, P.55]

The face of the other definitively appeals to Billy Budd, as a subject or "me" summoned to answer and accept this necessary responsibility by setting himself in the "accusative". The deadly confrontation between the foretopman and the master-at-arms takes on the appearance of a conflict between two faces: after ordering Claggart to "tell this man to his face" what he had just heard, Captain Vere is preparing "to scrutinize the mutually confronting visages." [9, P. 476]. The phrasing itself implicitly hints at an underlying meaning, as the definition of "confront" given by the *Webster Dictionary* suggests, among several possible meanings:

- 1) to face especially in challenge : oppose <confront an enemy>
- 2) to cause to meet : bring face-to-face <confront a reader with statistics>

Both meanings expressed by these entries suggest the potential but predictable violence that will break out in this impossible dialogue. The fatal outcome of this face-to-face is hardly surprising, since it establishes an admittedly impossible connection between the "yet smooth face, all but feminine in purity of natural com-

plexion [9, P. 436] of the innocent sailor and Claggart's "remarkable face," radically different from that of Billy and the other mariners as chapter 8 makes it clear. The "marked contrast between the persons of the twain" assessed in Chapter 13 extends into the crucial scene of chapter 19; the distance between the other and the foretopman seems to be infinite, yet this distance is at the same time a presence, albeit a definitely different and therefore infinitely "other" presence. The face-to-face stages the terrible encounter with the other in its immediacy, revealing in speech an other who goes beyond and exceeds the young sailor.

But the only "answer" that Billy Budd is able to make to the other does not resort to any speech or dialogue; as this is impossible, he responds with the physical violence of his uncontrolled gesture by which, far from shirking from the call of the other, Billy Budd really constitutes himself as a responsible subject, which entails a change in his status from the self in the accusative to a "self – accused I", following a progression from responsibility to identity, and finally to freedom.

Now there can be a language only because there is an otherness and a fundamental difference between speakers; therefore the other cannot be on an equal footing, essential to the existence of a dialogue, as any true "discourse is discourse with God and not with equals", Levinas declares [6, P. 297]. The absence of this distance, which allows communication to take place, is a separation which also constitutes a protection and makes the immediate inaccessible. This confrontation with the other face occurs in the speech that governs the face-to-face: in this case, the encounter with the naked and immediate presence of the other becomes totally irreducible to any measurement, any mediation, and my power cannot be satisfied with a partial negation; it asserts itself through a much more radical affirmation which can lead to death (i.e. absolute negation). Man facing man has no choice but to speak or to kill. In the confined space of the captain's cabin, Billy Budd is facing this face of exteriority; summoned by Vere to "speak" to defend himself, the petrified sailor is unable to do so and has no alternative but to kill the officer. In this terrible encounter where the mute protagonist has no other choice, to kill or to speak, he also shows a "passive" exposure to



the face, or to the other, when facing the face of the threatening other.

### ***Billy Budd's passion***

One of the main characteristics of this otherness is violence, whether immanent (the violence of the Same) or transcendent (the violence of the other). The violence of Transcendence is never perceived from a center, it is always received, or suffered. This violence is that of the other, who still affects me, an "exteriority" which comes from the other, or the others. But the Other is very ambivalent, and Billy Budd stands as a subject exposed to a threatening Other that appears either as Justice or murderer.

The Other appears as rather amorphous and blurry, for the other who threatens me is not only the victim but also the implacable judge who threatens my comfort, or even my life with a death sentence: in Melville's fiction, it appears alternately under the features of Captain Vere (who will ironically end his career on the aptly named "Atheist", and for Levinas, atheism means separation, an essential requirement for the possibility of the Face), of the officers of the hastily assembled court martial and of course, of the malicious, aggressive enemy Claggart, who harbours evil intentions towards Billy Budd. Faced with this wickedness of the others, only a passivity or undergoing of the subject (that can even reach nonsense) may be characterized as "absolute Patience" [9, P. 111].

In this relationship of non-reciprocity, where the Other is radically different, pointing to an "other" proves to be impossible, "the face appears as no one: it must be understood henceforth no longer only as superlative phenomenality, but as its anonymity; it appears as "no-one," as no individual, as no particular person, in short, it neither appears in person nor as a person." [8, P. 49]

### **CONCLUSION**

The notion of Other that guided our analysis varies according to philosophers and writers. In the two texts taken from the American literary canon, the concepts analysed by Levinas bring to the fore what a complete philosophical tradition had always rejected, i.e. the Other in aid of the Same, the Other who, "manifesting itself as being, loses its otherness" [3, P.263-] Like the various instances of idols in *Moby-Dick*, alterity appears as pure externality, sometimes without

phenomenality, as radically different; the other to whom the subject is exposed is also caught in an asymmetrical relationship, since he can hardly bear any relation with that irreducible otherness; and yet, the other orders the subject to answer. The case of Billy Budd summoned to respond to Claggart definitely shows the subject's passing to the accusative while being persecuted by the absolutely other.

Billy Budd's subjectivity is described as "twisted", crucified, as evidenced by the depiction of his face bearing "*an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold*" [9, P. 479]. This is indeed an ordeal, a "passion" of Billy Budd who also experiences the passion of exteriority. The Handsome Sailor seems doomed to passivity, a term which a semantic shift can change from "passion" to "patient passivity", where patience characterizes a passivity close to quietism; but there is another kind of "patience", which eludes any formulation and suggests a movement toward the unsurpassable, which says nothing, but the being as Being. This is the case of the young seaman, who does not utter a word, who never protests and nods silently, patiently. This infinite passivity, which "goes beyond being" makes him an original figure who goes beyond "any form explainable." Billy Budd unquestionably obeys a logic that defies comprehension; like Claggart, he already appears as "other" in the universe of the *Bellipotent*, a stranger to a world from which he stands out: after all, is not Billy "*(...) a sort of upright barbarian*" [9, P. 438] belonging to one of "*those so-called barbarous*" communities "*which in all respects stand nearer to unadulterate Nature*"? [9, P. 494]. Apparently the young seaman can exist only in the suspension of his will, his "ascending" flooding the world with the clarity of dawn: Billy Budd is an angel, as Vere's remark highlights it: "*Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!*" [9, P. 478]. An angel, that is to say αγγελος, a messenger of a transcendent speech in which God is the Other itself.

From *Moby-Dick* to *Billy Budd*, Melville's fiction shows an evolution similar to that of Levinas from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. However the question of otherness, of which the concept of face is only one aspect, stands as a central issue in the study of literary representation: first in terms of narrative and

storytelling, then in hermeneutics, through the notion of trace related to language in the system of J. Derrida, a contemporary and friend of Levinas's. The desire to get out of oneself towards the other is a thought of pure difference which encounters a major obstacle in language itself, as speech occurs in the space of the Same. Under these conditions, how can the other be conceived if it does speak only as exteriority, in a space of non-alterity?

This seems to imply a rejection of traditional philosophy, and a will to leave the model of Greek philosophy, based on the central ideas of the one and the same (for Plato, the other is a subjectivity that should be reduced, by force if

necessary). The discussion between the purser and the surgeon about the strange absence of movement points to the inadequacy of the Greek thought and model :

*"Euthanasia, Mr. Purser, is something like your will-power: I doubt its authenticity as a scientific term — begging your pardon again. It is at once imaginative and metaphysical — in short, Greek". [9, P. 499].*

In other words, the surgeon's doubts about Greek and its lack of seriousness seems to show the need to exit the tradition of Greek philosophy and the overwhelming supremacy of the One and the Same.

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