

Joe Bruner
Melville/Faust
IDS 365

An Imperfect Success

“There are times when the meaning of words seem to fade away; so entirely does our language fail to express the reality.”

– *Cordelia Harvey, Tennessee Confederate Nurse*

The term “language” is about as broad and vague as any discussion on communication can get, but when we look within the boundaries of a narrative, whether it is a novel or historical account, there is always a driving factor in how language is used. Specifically this paper will look at the predominant linguistic element of two books: how pacing dictates the reader’s understanding of Herman Melville’s novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* and how setting a distinct tone is the basis for Drew Gilpin Faust’s historical account *This Republic of Suffering*. What this understanding then allows us to do is to evaluate the use of language in the context of a specific narrative, and determine whether or not it is successful in its aims. I will show that despite being inherently flawed, language does meet its intended goals in these two books.

It is hard to read Faust’s recollection of death in the Civil War, and not see how her tone of voice heavily influences the reader’s perception of the topic. Faust draws from dozens of personal accounts – journals, diaries, published articles and more – from the Civil War era, to portray the striking image of death both on the battlefield and off. Lt. General Ulysses Grant wrote, “I saw an open field... so covered with dead that it would have been possible to walk across the clearing, in any direction, stepping only on dead bodies without a foot touching the ground” (Faust 58). Tone is set by what words a writer chooses to use. Grant’s despair is evident

given his description of how the soldiers lost their humanity by becoming common stepping items that “paved the earth,” as one soldier wrote. A Federal officer said, “the fact that many men get so accustomed to the thing, that they can step about among the heaps of dead bodies many of them their friends and acquaintances[,] without any particular emotion, is the worst of all” (Faust 60). Each quote that Faust offers had to be found, interpreted and specifically chosen to be put into the book for a purpose, which in this case is to set the tone. A criticism is that given the era, much of the tone will be the same despairing language, and there is relatively little the historian can do, if he or she wants to stay “true” to history. This criticism however, removes responsibility and the creative decision making from the writer. These letters and journals certainly tend to be very similar, but Grant’s lengthy description of the battle scene is quite different from the soldier’s three word description. The soldier’s words leave the reader to use his imagination, while Grant paints a specific, horrifying image in the reader’s head. Together however, we use our imagination to alter the horrific scene Grant describes.

Faust’s own language should not be overlooked either, because despite lacking the same intensity as descriptions of people present at the battlefield, she does use fiery language to evoke emotion within the reader, and get them to sympathize with the soldiers. In describing the need for revenge, Faust writes “The desire for retribution could be almost elemental in its passion, overcoming reason and releasing the restraints of fear and moral inhibition for soldiers who had witnessed the slaughter of their comrades” (Faust 35). The phrases “almost elemental in its passion” and “slaughter of their comrades” can hardly be described as neutral and objective. Her

intent was not to sway the reader towards the Union or the Confederacy, but towards the soldiers and their emotions, as well as their families back home. She writes, “To be deprived of these lessons, and thus this connection, seemed unbearable to many nineteenth-century Americans left at home while their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers died with their words unrecorded or even unheard” (Faust 11). The phrase “died with their words unrecorded or even unheard” is also emotionally charged, and is intended to deliver the sense of sadness should this misfortune happen. The tone of despair, of the dehumanization of the dead soldiers, of the fiery vengeance that swept the armies are careful constructions on Faust’s part to convey a specific image, and to drive the reader’s understanding of death in the civil war through the use of tone.

Melville uses a quite different technique in his novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*, which is to continuously be changing the pacing of the story. At times, Melville is casually drifting through the history, filling in the readers on the backstory of the world at sea, as decisions are being made by the characters in the main plot. Take for example, his explanation of why the *Bellipotent* is isolated from other ships for the duration of the story.

At the time of Billy Budd’s arbitrary enlistment into the *Bellipotent* that ship was on her way to join the Mediterranean fleet. No long time elapsed before the junction was effected. As one of that fleet the seventy-four participated in its movements, though at times on account of her superior sailing qualities, in the absence of frigates, dispatched on separate duty as a scout and at times on less temporary service. But with all this the story has little concernment, restricted as it is to the inner life of one particular ship and the career of an individual sailor. (Melville 54)

The narrator openly admits this particular detail has no relevance to the story at hand, and yet, by taking the time to share this detail with the reader, Melville has slowed down the narrative in this moment. This slowing down of the text gives greater impact to those moments that action happens and there is no moment to breathe. Such is the case in the moment when John Claggart, the Master-at-arms aboard the *Bellipotent*, is killed. Melville writes, “The next instant, quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck” (Melville 99). The image given is also a rapid one, as the reader can picture it several times over in the time it takes to read it. The action happens so fast, that if the reader is not paying attention, he might fail to comprehend the significance of what just happened. The effect is to draw attention to the quick moments. By drawing attention to these moments, the narrator influences how the reader thinks about the text, and what they consider important.

While this technique may be distasteful to some, (some will see it as distracting, boring in some moments and too quick in others) it is undoubtedly successful in its attempt, as is Faust’s use of tone, to impress upon the reader the reality of its narrative. Reality in this case referring to the lived experience of the soldiers, or the would-be lived experiences for fictional characters. In direct contrast to the quote given at the beginning of this essay, language, if successfully used, does *not* fail to express the reality (of any scene). It is a given that language cannot recreate the physical experience, but then again neither can movies, paintings, nor any other means of creative communication. Therefore language cannot be singled out as failing to recreate the

physical experience. What language can do, however, is express the experience to the reader.

Faust evokes the horror, sadness and even the disgust that came along with death in the civil war.

By intentionally constructing tone of voice, she is quite successful at expressing the reality of the

civil war. Likewise, Melville's constantly shifting pace of the story is successful at expressing

the history of the situation as well as signaling to the reader what is significant to the plot,

thereby expressing the historical and emotionally moving reality of the fictional story. It does not

matter that language is inherently flawed at communicating physical experience, because

ultimately as long as it is carefully constructed using a driving factor, such as tone or pacing,

language is quite successful at expressing any reality.