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Melville’s Fist:
The Execution of Billy Budd

1. THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.

Melville, *Billy Budd*¹

The plot of Melville’s *Billy Budd* is well known, and, like its title character, appears entirely straightforward and simple. It is a tale of three men in a boat: the innocent, ignorant foretopman, handsome Billy Budd; the devious, urbane master-at-arms, John Claggart; and the respectable, bookish commanding officer, Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax (“Starry”) Vere. Falsely accused by Claggart of plotting mutiny aboard the British man-of-war *Bellipotent*, Billy Budd, his speech impeded by a stutter, strikes his accuser dead in front of the Captain, and is condemned, after a summary trial, to hang.

In spite of the apparent straightforwardness of the facts of the case, however, there exists in the critical literature on *Billy Budd* a notable range of disagreement over the ultimate meaning of the tale. For some, the story constitutes Melville’s “testament of acceptance,”² his “everlasting yea,”³ his “acceptance of tragedy,”⁴ or at least his “recognition of necessity.”⁵ For others, Melville’s “final stage” is, on the contrary,


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“irony”\(^6\): *Billy Budd* is considered a “testament of resistance,”\(^7\) “ironic social criticism,”\(^8\) or the last vituperation in Melville’s “quarrel with God.”\(^9\) More recently, critical attention has devoted itself to the fact of ambiguity itself in the story, sometimes deploring it,\(^10\) sometimes reveling in it,\(^11\) and sometimes simply listing it.\(^12\) The ambiguity is attributed to various causes: the unfinished state of the manuscript, Melville’s change of heart toward Vere, Melville’s unreconciled ambivalence toward authority or his guilt about paternity, or the incompatibility between the “plot” and the “story.”\(^13\) But however great the disagreement over the meaning of this posthumous novel, all critics seem to agree in considering it as Melville’s “last word.” “With the mere fact of the long silence in our minds,” writes J. M. Murry, “we could not help regarding ‘Billy Budd’ as the last will and spiritual testament of a man of genius.”\(^14\)

To regard a story as its author’s last will and testament is clearly to grant it a privileged, determining position in the body of that author’s work. As the word implies, the “will” is taken to represent the author’s final “intentions”: in writing his “will,” the author is presumed to have summed up and evaluated his entire literary output, and directed it—as proof against “dissemination”—toward some determinable destination. The “ending” thus somehow acquires the metalinguistic authority to confer finality and intelligibility upon all that precedes it.

Now, since this sense of Melville’s ending is so central to *Billy Budd* criticism, it might be useful to take a look at the nature of the ending of the story itself. Curiously enough, we find that *Billy Budd* ends not once, but no less than four times. As Melville himself describes it, the story continues far beyond its “proper” end: “How it fared with the Handsome Sailor during the year of the Great Mutiny has been faithfully given. But though properly the story ends with his life, something in the

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way of sequel will not be amiss” (p. 405). This “sequel” consists of “three brief chapters”: 1) the story of the death of Captain Vere after an encounter with the French ship, the Athée; 2) a transcription of the Budd-Claggart affair published in an “authorized” naval publication, in which the characters of the two men are reversed, with Budd represented as the depraved villain and Claggart as the heroic victim; and 3) a description of the posthumous mythification of Billy Budd by his fellow sailors and a transcription of the ballad written by one of them, which presents itself as a monologue spoken by Billy on the eve of his execution. Billy Budd’s last words, like Melville’s own, are thus spoken posthumously—indeed the final line of the story is uttered from the bottom of the sea.

The question of the sense of Melville’s ending is thus raised not only by the story, but also in the story. But far from tying up the loose ends of a confusing literary life, Melville’s last words are an affirmation of the necessity of “ragged edges”:

The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial. (p. 405)

The story ends by fearlessly fraying its own symmetry, thrice transgressing its own “proper” end: there is something inherently improper about this testamentary disposition of Melville’s literary property. Indeed, far from totalizing itself into intentional finality, the story in fact begins to repeat itself—retelling itself first in reverse, and then in verse. The ending not only has no special authority: it problematizes the very idea of authority by placing its own reversal in the pages of an “authorized” naval chronicle. To end is to repeat, and to repeat is to be ungovernably open to revision, displacement, and reversal.15 The sense of Melville’s ending is to empty the ending of any privileged control over sense.

II. THE PLOT AGAINST THE CHARACTERS

For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a

15. Interestingly enough, reversibility seems to constitute not only Billy Budd’s ending but also its origin: the Somers mutiny case, which commentators have seen as a major source for the story, had been brought back to Melville’s attention at the time he was writing Billy Budd by two opposing articles that reopened and retold the Somers case, forty-six years after the fact, in precisely antithetical terms.
quality. Now character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse.

Aristotle, *Poetics*

In beginning our study of *Billy Budd* with its ending, we, too, seem to have reversed the “proper” order of things. Most studies of the story tend to begin, after a few general remarks about the nature of good and evil, with a delineation of the three main characters: Billy, Claggart, and Vere. As Charles Weir puts it, “The purely physical action of the story is clear enough, and about its significant details there is never any doubt. . . . It is, therefore, with some consideration of the characters of the three principal actors that any analysis must begin.” 16 “Structurally,” writes F. B. Freeman, “the three characters are the novel” (p. 73).

Melville goes to great lengths to describe both the physical and the moral characteristics of his protagonists. Billy Budd, a twenty-one-year-old “novice in the complexities of factitious life” is remarkable for his “significant personal beauty,” his “reposeful good nature,” his “straightforward simplicity,” and his “unconventional rectitude.” But Billy’s intelligence (“such as it was,” says Melville) is as primitive as his virtues are pristine. He is illiterate, he cannot understand ambiguity, and he stutters.

Claggart, on the other hand, is presented as the very image of urbane, intellectualized, articulate evil. Although “of no ill figure upon the whole,” something in Claggart’s pallid face consistently inspires uneasiness and mistrust. He is a man, writes Melville, “in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short, ‘a depravity according to nature’” (p. 354). The mere sight of Billy Budd’s rosy beauty and rollicking innocence does not fail to provoke in such a character “an antipathy spontaneous and profound.”

The third man in the drama, the one who has inspired the greatest critical dissent, is presented in less vivid but curiously more contradictory terms. The Bellipotent’s captain is described as both unaffected and pedantic, dreamy and resolute, irascible and undemonstrative, “mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline,” “intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so” (p. 338). While Billy and Claggart are said to owe their characters to “nature,” Captain Vere is shaped mainly by his fondness for books:

He loved books, never going to sea without a newly replenished library, compact but of the best. . . . With nothing of that literary

taste which less heeds the thing conveyed than the vehicle, his bias was toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines: books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era—history, biography, and unconventional writers like Montaigne, who, free from cant and convention, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities. (p. 340)

Vere, then, is an honest, serious reader, seemingly well suited for the role of judge and witness that in the course of the story he will come to play.

No consideration of the nature of character in *Billy Budd*, however, can fail to take into account the fact that the fate of each of the characters is the direct reverse of what one is led to expect from his "nature." Billy is sweet, innocent, and harmless, yet he kills. Claggart is evil, perverted, and mendacious, yet he dies a victim. Vere is sagacious and responsible, yet he allows a man whom he feels to be blameless to hang. It is this discrepancy between character and action that gives rise to the critical disagreement over the story: readers tend either to save the plot and condemn Billy ("acceptance," "tragedy," or "necessity"), or to save Billy and condemn the plot ("irony," "injustice," or "social criticism").

In an effort to make sense of this troubling incompatibility between character and plot, many readers are tempted to say of Billy and Claggart, as does W. Y. Tindall, that "each is more important for what he is than what he does. . . . Good and bad, they occupy the region of good and evil."17 This reading effectively preserves the allegorical values suggested by Melville's opening chapters, but it does so only by denying the importance of the plot. It ends where the plot begins: with the identification of the moral natures of the characters. One may therefore ask whether the allegorical interpretation (good vs. evil) depends as such on this sort of preference for "being" over "doing," and, if so, what effect the incompatibility between character and action may have on the allegorical functioning of *Billy Budd*.

Interestingly enough, Melville himself both invites an allegorical reading and subverts the very terms of its consistency when he writes of the murder: "Innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places" (p. 380). Allowing for the existence of personification but reversing the relation between personifier and personified, positioning an opposition between good and evil only to make each term take

on the properties of its opposite, Melville thus sets up his plot in the form of a chiasmus:

Billy — Innocence — Guilt — Claggart

This story, which is often read as a retelling of the story of Christ, is thus literally a cruci-fiction—a fiction structured in the shape of a cross. At the moment of the reversal, an instant before his fist shoots out, Billy's face seems to mark out the point of crossing, bearing "an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold" (p. 376). Innocence and guilt, criminal and victim, change places through the mute expressiveness of Billy's inability to speak.

If Billy Budd is indeed an allegory, it is thus an allegory of the questioning of the traditional conditions of allegorical stability. The fact that Melville's plot requires that the good act out the evil designs of the bad while the bad suffer the unwarranted fate of the good indicates that the real opposition with which Melville is preoccupied here is less the static opposition between evil and good than the dynamic opposition between a man's "nature" and his acts, or, in Tyndall's terms, the relation between human "being" and human "doing."

Curiously enough, it is precisely this question of "being" versus "doing" that is brought up by the only sentence we ever see Claggart directly address to Billy Budd. When Billy accidentally spills his soup across the path of the master-at-arms, Claggart playfully replies, "Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!" (p. 350; emphasis mine). The proverbial expression "handsome is as handsome does," from which this exclamation springs, posits the possibility of a continuous, predictable, transparent relationship between "being" and "doing." It supposes that the inner goodness of Billy Budd is in harmonious accord with his fair appearance, that, as Melville writes of the stereotypical "Handsome Sailor" in the opening pages of the story, "the moral nature" is not "out of keeping with the physical make" (p. 322). But it is precisely this continuity between the physical and the moral, between appearance and action, or between "being" and "doing," that Claggart questions in Billy Budd. He warns Captain Vere not to be taken in by Billy's physical beauty: "You have but noted his fair cheek. A mantrap may be under the ruddy-tipped daisies" (p. 372). Claggart indeed soon finds his suspicions confirmed with a vengeance: when he repeats his accusation in front of Billy, he is struck down dead. It would thus seem that to question the continuity between character and action cannot be done with impunity, that fundamental questions of life and death are always surreptitiously involved.
In an effort to examine what it is that is at stake in Claggart's accusation, it might be helpful to view the opposition between Billy and Claggart as an opposition not between innocence and guilt but between two conceptions of language, or between two types of reading. Billy seemingly represents the perfectly *motivated* sign; that is, his inner self (the signified) is considered transparently readable from the beauty of his outer self (the signifier). His "straightforward simplicity" is the very opposite of the "moral obliquities" or "crookedness of heart" that characterizes "citified" or rhetorically sophisticated man. "To deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort," writes Melville, "was quite foreign to his nature" (p. 327). In accordance with this "nature," Billy reads everything at face value, never questioning the meaning of appearances. He is dumbfounded at the Dansker's suggestion, "incomprehensible to a novice," that Claggart's very pleasantness can be interpreted as its opposite, as a sign that he is "down on" Billy Budd. To Billy, "the occasional frank air and pleasant word *went for what they purported to be*, the young sailor never having heard as yet of the 'too fair-spoken man'" (pp. 365–66; emphasis mine). As a reader, then, Billy is symbolically as well as factually illiterate. His literal-mindedness is represented by his illiteracy because, in assuming that language can be taken at face value, he excludes the very functioning of difference that makes the act of reading both indispensable and undecidable.

Claggart, on the other hand, is the very image of difference and duplicity, both in his appearance and in his character. His face is not ugly, but it hints of something defective or abnormal. He has no vices, yet he incarnates evil. He is an intellectual, but uses reason as "an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational" (p. 354). Billy inspires in him both "profound antipathy" and a "soft yearning." In the incompatibility of his attributes, Claggart is thus a personification of ambiguity and ambivalence, of the distance between signifier and signified, of the separation between being and doing: "apprehending the good, but powerless to be it, a nature like Claggart's, . . . what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself" (p. 356). As a reader, Claggart has learned to "exercise a distrust keen in proportion to the fairness of the appearance" (p. 364). He is properly an ironic reader, who, assuming the sign to be arbitrary and unmotivated, reverses the value signs of appearances and takes a daisy for a mantrap and an unmotivated accidental spilling of soup for an intentional sly escape of antipathy. Claggart meets his downfall, however, when he attempts to master the arbitrariness of the sign for his own ends, precisely by falsely (that is, arbitrarily) accusing Billy of harboring arbitrariness, of hiding a mutineer beneath the appearance of a baby.

Such a formulation of the Budd/Claggart relationship enables one to
take a new look not only at the story itself, but at the criticism as well. For, curiously enough, it is precisely this opposition between the literal reader (Billy) and the ironic reader (Claggart) that is reenacted in the critical readings of *Billy Budd* in the opposition between the "acceptance" school and the "irony" school. Those who see the story as a "testament of acceptance" tend to take Billy's final benediction of Vere at face value: as Lewis Mumford puts it, "As Melville's own end approached, he cried out with Billy Budd: God Bless Captain Vere! In this final affirmation Herman Melville died." In contrast, those who read the tale ironically tend to take Billy's sweet farewell as Melville's bitter curse. Joseph Schiffman writes: "At heart a kind man, Vere, strange to say, makes possible the depraved Claggart's wish—the destruction of Billy. 'God bless Captain Vere!' Is this not piercing irony? As innocent Billy utters these words, does not the reader gag?" (p. 133) But since the acceptance/irony dichotomy is already contained within the story, since it is obviously one of the things the story is about, it is not enough to try to decide which of the readings is correct. What the reader of *Billy Budd* must do is to analyze what is at stake in the very opposition between literality and irony. This question, crucial for an understanding of *Billy Budd* not only as a literary but also as a critical phenomenon, will be taken up again in the final pages of the present study, but first let us examine further the linguistic implications of the murder itself.

III. THE FIEND THAT LIES LIKE TRUTH

Outwardly regarded, our craft is a lie; for all that is outwardly seen of it is the clean-swept deck, and oft-painted planks comprised above the water-line; whereas, the vast mass of our fabric, with all its store-rooms of secrets, forever slides along far under the surface.

Melville, *White Jacket*

If Claggart's accusation that Billy is secretly plotting mutiny is essentially an affirmation of the possibility of a discontinuity between being and doing, of an arbitrary, nonmotivated relation between signifier and signified, then Billy's blow must be read as an attempt violently to deny that discontinuity or arbitrariness. The blow, as a denial, functions as a substitute for speech, as Billy, during his trial, explains: "I did not mean to kill him. Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him. But he foully lied to my face and in presence of my captain, and I had to say something, and I could only say it with a blow" (p. 383). But in striking a blow in defense of the sign's motivation, Billy, paradoxically enough, actually personifies the very absence of motivation:

"I did not mean. . . ." His blow is involuntary, accidental, properly unmotivated. He is a sign that does not mean to mean. Billy, who cannot understand ambiguity, who takes pleasant words at face value and then obliterates Claggart for suggesting that one could do otherwise, whose sudden blow is a violent denial of any discrepancy between his being and his doing, thus ends up radically illustrating the very discrepancy he denies.

The story thus takes place between the postulate of continuity between signifier and signified ("handsome is as handsome does") and the postulate of their discontinuity ("a mantrap may be under the ruddy-tipped daisies"). Claggart, whose accusations of incipient mutiny are apparently false and therefore illustrate the very doublefacedness which they attribute to Billy, is negated for proclaiming the very lie about Billy which Billy's act of negation paradoxically proves to be the truth.

This paradox can also be stated in another way, in terms of the opposition between the performative and the constative functions of language. Constative language is language used as an instrument of cognition—it describes, reports, speaks about something other than itself. Performative language is language which itself functions as an act, not as a report of one. Promising, betting, swearing, marrying, and declaring war, for example, are not descriptions of acts but acts in their own right. The proverb "handsome is as handsome does" can thus also be read as a statement of the compatibility between the constative ("being") and the performative ("doing") dimensions of language. But what Billy's act dramatizes is precisely their radical *incompatibility*—Billy performs the truth of Claggart's report to Vere only by means of his absolute and blind denial of its cognitive validity. If Billy had understood the truth, he would not have performed it. Handsome cannot both be and do its own undoing. The knowledge that being and doing are incompatible cannot know the ultimate performance of its own confirmation.

Melville's chiasmus thus creates a reversal not only between the places of guilt and innocence, but between the postulate of continuity and the postulate of discontinuity between doing and being, performance and cognition. When Billy's fist strikes Claggart's forehead, it is no longer possible for knowing and doing to meet. Melville's story not only reports the occurrence of a particularly deadly performative utterance; it itself *performs* the radical incompatibility between knowledge and acts.

All this, we recall, is triggered by a stutter, a linguistic defect. No analysis of the story's dramatization of linguistic categories can be complete without careful attention to this glaring infelicity. Billy's "vocal defect" is presented and explained in the story in the following terms:
There was just one thing amiss in him . . . , an occasional liability to a vocal defect. Though in the hour of elemental uproar or peril he was everything that a sailor should be, yet under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse. In this particular Billy was a striking instance that the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden, still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of Earth. In every case, one way or another he is sure to slip in his little card, as much as to remind us—I too have a hand here. (pp. 331-332)

It is doubtless this Satanic "hand" that shoots out when Billy's speech fails him. Billy is all too literally a "striking instance" of the workings of the "envious marplot."

Melville's choice of the word "marplot" to characterize the originator of Billy's stutter deserves special note. It seems logical to understand that the stutter "mars" the plot in that it triggers the reversal of roles between Billy and Claggart. Yet in another sense this reversal does not mar the plot, it constitutes it. Here as in the story of Eden, what the envious marplot mars is not the plot, but the state of plotlessness that exists "in the beginning." What both the Book of Genesis and Billy Budd narrate is thus not the story of a fall, but a fall into story.

In this connection, it is not irrelevant to recall what it is that Claggart falsely accuses Billy of: precisely of instigating a plot, of stirring up mutiny against the naval authorities. What Claggart is in a sense doing by positing this fictitious plot, then, is trying desperately to scare up a plot for the story. And it is Billy's very act of denial of his involvement in any plot that finally brings him into the plot. Billy's involuntary blow is an act of mutiny not only against the authority of his naval superiors, but also against the authority of his own conscious intentions. Perhaps it is not by chance that the word "plot" can mean both "intrigue" and "story": if all plots somehow tell the story of their own marring, then perhaps it could be said that all plots are plots against authority, that authority is precisely that which creates the scene of its own destruction, that all stories necessarily recount by their very existence the subversion of the father, of the gods, of consciousness, of order, of expectations, or of meaning.

But is Billy truly as "plotless" as he appears? Does his "simplicity" hide no division, no ambiguity? As many critics have remarked, Billy's character seems to result mainly from his exclusion of the negative. When informed that he is being arbitrarily impressed for service on a
man-of-war, Billy “makes no demur” (p. 323). When invited to a clandestine meeting by a mysterious stranger, Billy acquiesces through his “incapacity of plumply saying no” (p. 359). But it is interesting to note that although Billy thus seems to be “just a boy who cain’t say no,” almost all the words used to describe him are negative in form: innocent, un-conventional, il-literate, un-sophisticated, un-adulterate, etc. And although he denies any discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, he does not prove to be totally incapable of lying. When asked about the shady visit of the afterguardsman, he distorts his account in order to edit out anything that indicates any incompatibility with the absolute maintenance of authority. He neglects to report the questionable proposition even though “it was his duty as a loyal blue jacket” (p. 362) to do so. In thus shrinking from “the dirty work of a telltale” (p. 362), Billy maintains his “plotlessness” not spontaneously but through a complex act of filtering. Far from being simply and naturally pure, he is obsessed with maintaining his own irreproachability in the eyes of authority. After witnessing a flogging, he is so horrified that he resolves “that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof” (p. 346). Billy does not simply exclude the negative: he represses it. His reaction to questionable behavior of any sort (Red Whiskers, the afterguardsman, Claggart) is to obliterate it. He retains his “blank ignorance” (p. 363) only by a vigorous act of erasing. As Melville says of Billy’s reaction to Claggart’s petty provocations, “the ineffactual speculations into which he was led were so disturbingly alien to him that he did his best to smother them” (p. 362; emphasis mine).

In his disgustful recoil from an overture which, though he but ill comprehended, he instinctively knew must involve evil of some sort, Billy Budd was like a young horse fresh from the pasture suddenly inhaling a vile whiff from some chemical factory, and by repeated snortings trying to get it out of his nostrils and lungs. This frame of mind barred all desire of holding further parley with the fellow, even were it but for the purpose of gaining some enlightenment as to his design in approaching him. (p. 361; emphasis mine)

Billy maintains his purity only through constant, though unconscious, censorship. “Innocence,” writes Melville, “was his blinder” (p. 366).

It is interesting to note that while the majority of readers see Billy as a personification of goodness and Claggart as a personification of evil, those who do not, tend to read from a psychoanalytical point of view. Much has been made of Claggart’s latent homosexuality, which Melville clearly suggests. Claggart, like the hypothetical “X—,” “is a nut not to
be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan" (p. 352). The "unobserved glance" he sometimes casts upon Billy contains "a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (p. 365). The spilling of the soup and Claggart's reaction to it are often read symbolically as a sexual exchange, the import of which, of course, is lost on Billy, who cannot read.

According to this perspective, Claggart's so-called evil is thus really a repressed form of love. But it is perhaps even more interesting to examine the way in which the psychoanalytical view treats Billy's so-called goodness as being in reality a repressed form of hate:

The persistent feminine imagery . . . indicate[s] that Billy has identified himself with the mother at a pre-Oedipean level and has adopted the attitude of harmlessness and placation toward the father in order to avoid the hard struggle of the Oedipus conflict. . . . That all Billy's rage and hostility against the father are unconscious is symbolized by the fact that whenever aroused it cannot find expression in spoken language. . . . This is a mechanism for keeping himself from admitting his own guilt and his own destructiveness.\footnote{From Richard Chase, Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 269-70.}  

All of Billy's conscious acts are toward passivity. . . . In symbolic language, Billy Budd is seeking his own castration—seeking to yield up his vitality to an authoritative but kindly father, whom he finds in Captain Vere.\footnote{Ibid., p. 269.}

Quite often a patient begins to stutter when he is particularly eager to prove a point. Behind his apparent zeal he has concealed a hostile or sadistic tendency to destroy his opponent by means of words, and the stuttering is both a blocking of and a punishment for this tendency. Still more often stuttering is exacerbated by the presence of prominent or authoritative persons, that is, of paternal figures against whom the unconscious hostility is most intense.\footnote{O. Fenichel, The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neuroses, quoted in Stafford, Billy Budd and the Critics (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1969), p. 176.}

Although \textit{Billy Budd, Sailor} is placed in historical time, . . . the warfare is not between nations for supremacy on the seas but between father and son in the eternal warfare to determine succession.\footnote{Edwin Haviland Miller, Melville (New York: Persea Books, Inc., 1975), p. 358.} 

\footnotesize{20. Ibid., p. 269.}  
When Vere becomes the father, Claggart and Billy are no longer sailors but sons in rivalry for his favor and blessing. Claggart manifestly is charging mutiny but latently is accusing the younger son or brother of plotting the father's overthrow. . . . When Billy strikes Claggart with a furious blow to the forehead, he puts out the "evil eye" of his enemy-rival, but at the same time the blow is displaced, since Billy is prohibited from striking the father. After Claggart is struck and lies on the deck "a dead snake," Vere covers his face in silent recognition of the displaced blow.23

Billy's type of innocence is . . . pseudoinnocence. . . . Capitalizing on naiveté, it consists of a childhood that is never outgrown, a kind of fixation on the past. . . . When we face questions too big and too horrendous to contemplate, . . . we tend to shrink into this kind of innocence and make a virtue of powerlessness, weakness, and helplessness. . . . It is this innocence that cannot come to terms with the destructiveness in one's self or others; and hence, as with Billy Budd, it actually becomes self-destructive.24

The psychoanalytical reading is thus a demystification of the notion of innocence portrayed in Billy Budd. In the psychoanalytical view, what underlies the metaphysical lament that in this world "goodness is impotent" is the idea that it is impotence that is good, that harmlessness is innocent, that naiveté is lovable, that "giving no cause of offense to anybody" and resolving never "to do or omit aught that might merit . . . reproof" (p. 346) are the highest ideals in human conduct. While most readers react to Billy as do his fellow crewmembers ("they all love him," p. 325), the psychoanalysts share Claggart's distrust ("for all his youth and good looks, a deep one," p. 371) and even disdain ("to be nothing more than innocent!" p. 356).

In this connection it is curious to note that while the psychoanalysts have implicitly chosen to adopt the attitude of Claggart, Melville, in the crucial confrontation scene, comes close to presenting Claggart precisely as a psychoanalyst:

With the measured step and calm collected air of an asylum physician approaching in the public hall some patient beginning to show indications of a coming paroxysm, Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy and, mesmerically looking him in the eye, briefly recapitulated the accusation. (p. 375)

23. Ibid., p. 362.
It is as though Claggart as analyst, in attempting to bring Billy's unconscious hostility to consciousness, unintentionally unleashes the destructive acting-out of transferential rage. The fatal blow, far from being an unmotivated accident, is the gigantic return of the power of negation that Billy has been repressing all his life. And in his blind destructiveness, Billy lashes out not only against the "father," but also against the very process of analysis itself.

The difference between the psychoanalytical and the traditional "metaphysical" reading of Billy Budd lies mainly in the status accorded to the fatal blow. If Billy represents pure goodness, then his act is unintentional but symbolically righteous, since it results in the destruction of the "evil" Claggart. If Billy is a case of neurotic repression, then his act is determined by his unconscious desires, and reveals the destructiveness of the attempt to repress one's own destructiveness. In the first case, the murder is accidental; in the second, it is the fulfillment of a wish. Strangely enough, this question of accident versus motivation is brought up again at the end of the story, in the curious fact of the lack of spontaneous ejaculation in Billy's corpse. Whether the lack of spasm is as mechanical as its presence would have been, or whether it results from what the purser calls "will power" or "euthanasia," the incident stands as a negative analogue of the murder scene. In the former, it is the absence; in the latter, the presence, of physical violence that offers a challenge to interpretation. The burlesque discussion of the "prodigy of repose" by the purser and the surgeon, interrupting as it does the solemnity of Billy's "ascension," can have no other purpose than that of dramatizing the central importance for the story of the question of arbitrary accident versus determinable motivation. If the psychoanalytical and the metaphysical readings, however incompatible, are both equally supported by textual evidence, then perhaps Melville, rather than asking us to choose between them, is presenting us with a context in which to examine what is at stake in the very oppositions between psychoanalysis and metaphysics, chance and determination, the willed and the accidental, the unconscious and the moral.

IV. THE DEADLY SPACE BETWEEN

And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out.

Hamlet II.i

While Billy thus stands as a performative riddle (are his actions motivated or accidental?), John Claggart is presented as an enigma for cog-
nition, a man "who for reasons of his own was keeping incog" (p. 343; emphasis mine). Repeatedly referred to as a "mystery," Claggart, it seems, is difficult, even perilous, to describe:

For the adequate comprehending of Claggart by a normal nature these hints are insufficient. To pass from a normal nature to him one must cross "the deadly space between." And this is best done by indirection. (p. 352)

Between Claggart and a "normal nature," there exists a gaping cognitive chasm. In a literal sense, this image of crossing a "deadly space" in order to reach Claggart can be seen almost as an ironic prefiguration of the murder. Billy does indeed "cross" the "space" between himself and Claggart by means of a "deadly" blow. The phrase "space between" recurs, in fact, just after the murder, to refer to the physical separation between the dead Claggart and the condemned Billy:

Aft, and on either side, was a small stateroom, the one now temporarily a jail and the other a dead-house, and a yet smaller compartment, leaving a space between expanding forward. (p. 382; emphasis mine)

It is by means of a deadly chiasmus that the spatial chasm is crossed.

But physical separation is obviously not the only kind of "deadly space" involved here. The expression "deadly space between" refers primarily to a gap in cognition, a boundary beyond which ordinary understanding does not normally go. This sort of space, which stands as a limit to comprehension, seems to be an inherent feature of the attempt to describe John Claggart. From the very beginning, Melville admits: "His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it" (p. 342). What Melville says he will not do here is precisely what Billy Budd does do: hit John Claggart. It would seem that speaking and killing are thus mutually exclusive: Billy Budd kills because he cannot speak, while Melville, through the very act of speaking, does not kill. Billy's fist crosses the "deadly space" directly; Melville's crossing, "done by indirection," leaves its target intact.

This state of affairs, reassuring as it sounds on a moral level, is, however, rather unsettling if one examines what it implies about Melville's writing. For how reliable can a description be if it does not hit its object? What do we come to know of John Claggart if what we learn is that his portrait is askew? If to describe perfectly, to refer adequately, would be to "hit" the referent and thus annihilate it; if to know completely would be to obliterate the very object known; if the perfect fulfillment of the constative, referential function of language would
consist in the total obliteration of the object of that function; then language can retain its “innocence” only by giving up its referential validity. Melville can avoid murder only by grounding his discourse in ineradicable error. If to cross a space by indirection—that is, by rhetorical displacement—is to escape deadliness, that crossing can succeed only on the condition of radically losing its way.

It can thus be said that the “deadly space” that runs through Billy Budd is located between cognition and performance, knowing and doing, error and murder. But even this formulation is insufficient if it is taken to imply that doing is deadly, while speaking is not, or that directness is murderous while avoidance is innocent. Melville does not simply recommend the replacement of doing by speaking or of direct by indirect language. He continues to treat obliquity and deviation as evils, and speaks of digression as a “literary sin”:

In this matter of writing, resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some bypaths have an enticement not readily to be withstood. I am going to err into such a bypath. If the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least, we can promise ourselves that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the divergence will be. (p. 334)

Directness and indirectness are equally suspect, and equally innocent. Further complications of the moral status of rhetoric will be examined later in this study, but first let us pursue the notion of the “deadly space.”

If the space at work in Billy Budd cannot be located simply and unequivocally between language and action or between directness and indirection, where is it located and how does it function? Why is it the space itself that is called “deadly”? And how, more particularly, does Melville go about not hitting John Claggart?

Melville takes up the question of Claggart’s “nature” many times. Each time, the description is proffered as a necessary key to the understanding of the story. And yet, each time, what we learn about the master-at-arms is that we cannot learn anything:

Nothing was known of his former life (p. 343)

About as much was really known to the Bellipotent’s tars of the master-at-arms’ career before entering the service as an astronomer knows about a comet’s travels prior to its first observable appearance in the sky. (p. 345)

What can more partake of the mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound . . . ? (p. 351)
Dark sayings are these, some will say. But why? Is it because they somewhat savor of Holy Writ in its phrase “mystery of iniquity”? (p. 354)

And, after informing us that the crossing of the “deadly space” between Claggart and a “normal nature” is “best done by indirection,” Melville’s narrator takes himself at his word: he digresses into a long fictitious dialogue between himself as a youth and an older “honest scholar” concerning a mysterious Mr. “X—” whose “labyrinth” cannot be penetrated by “knowledge of the world,” a dialogue so full of periphrases that the youthful participant himself “did not quite see” its “drift” (p. 353). The very phrase “the deadly space between” is, according to editors Hayford and Sealts, a quotation of unknown origin: the source of the expression used to designate what is not known is thus itself unknown. Even the seemingly satisfactory Platonic definition of Claggart’s evil—“Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature”—is in fact, as F. B. Freeman points out, nothing but a tautology. Syntactically, the definition fulfills its function, but it is empty of any cognitive information. The place of explanation and definition is repeatedly filled, but its content is always lacking. What the progress of Melville’s description describes is an infinite regress of knowledge. The “deadly space” is situated not between Claggart and his fellow men, but within Melville’s very attempts to account for him.

It would seem that rather than simply separating language from action, the space in question is also at work within language itself. In the tautology of Claggart’s evil, it marks an empty articulation between the expression and its definition. Other linguistic spaces abound. What, indeed, is Billy’s fateful stutter, if not a deadly gap in his ability to speak? The space opened up by the stutter is the pivot on which the entire story turns. And the last words of the dying Captain Vere, which stand in the place of ultimate commentary upon the drama, are simply “Billy Budd, Billy Budd,” the empty repetition of a name. At all the crucial moments in the drama—in the origin of evil, in the trigger of the act, in the final assessment—the language of Billy Budd stutters. At those moments, the constative or referential content is eclipsed; language conveys only its own empty, mechanical functioning. But it is precisely these very gaps in understanding that Melville is asking us to understand.

The cognitive spaces marked out by these eclipses of meaning are important not because they mark the limits of interpretation but because they function as its cause. The gaps in understanding are never directly perceived as such by the characters in the novel; those gaps are themselves taken as interpretable signs and triggers for interpretation. The
lack of knowledge of Claggart's past, for example, is seen as a sign that he has something to hide:

Nothing was known of his former life. . . . Among certain grizzled sea gossips of the gun decks and forecastle went a rumor perdue that the master-at-arms was a chevalier [Melville's italics] who had volunteered into the King's navy by way of compounding for some mysterious swindle whereof he had been arraigned at the King's Bench. The fact that nobody could substantiate this report was, of course, nothing against its secret currency. . . . Indeed a man of Claggart's accomplishments, without prior nautical experience entering the navy at mature life, as he did, and necessarily allotted at the start to the lowest grade in it; a man too who never made allusion to his previous life ashore; these were circumstances which in the dearth of exact knowledge as to his true antecedents opened to the invidious a vague field for unfavorable surmise. (p. 343)

In other words, it is precisely the absence of knowledge that here leads to the propagation of tales. The fact that nothing is known of Claggart's origins is not a simple, contingent, theoretically remediable lack of information: it is the very origin of his "evil nature." Interestingly, in Billy's case, an equal lack of knowledge leads some readers to see his origin as divine. Asked who his father is, Billy replies, "God knows." The divine and the satanic can thus be seen as metaphysical interpretations of discontinuities in knowledge. In *Billy Budd*, a stutter and a tautology serve to mark the spot from which evil springs.

Evil, then, is essentially the misreading of discontinuity through the attribution of meaning to a space or division in language. But the fact that stories of Claggart's evil arise out of a seemingly meaningless gap in knowledge is hardly a meaningless or innocent fact in itself, either in its causes or in its consequences. Claggart's function is that of a policeman "charged among other matters with the duty of preserving order on the populous lower gun decks" (p. 342). As Melville points out, "no man holding his office in a man-of-war can ever hope to be popular with the crew" (p. 345). The inevitable climate of resentment surrounding the master-at-arms might itself be sufficient to turn the hypothesis of depravity into a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Melville puts it, "The point of the present story turn[s] on the hidden nature of the master-at-arms" (p. 354). The entire plot of *Billy Budd* could conceivably be seen as a consequence not of what Claggart does, but of what he does not say.

It is thus by means of the misreading of gaps in knowledge and of discontinuities in action that the plot of *Billy Budd* takes shape. But because Melville describes both the spaces and the readings they engen-
der, his concentration on the vagaries of interpretive error open up within the text the possibility of substantiating quite a number of "inside narratives" different from the one with which we are explicitly presented. What Melville's tale tells is the snowballing of tale-telling. It is possible, indeed, to retell the story from a point of view that fully justifies Claggart's suspicions, merely by putting together a series of indications already available in the narrative:

1. As Billy is being taken from the merchant ship to the warship, he shouts in farewell, "And good-bye to you too, old Rights-of-Man." Lt. Ratcliffe, who later recounts the incident to Claggart (as is shown by the latter's referring to it in making his accusation to Vere), interprets this as "a sly slur at impressment in general, and that of himself in especial" (p. 327). The first information Claggart is likely to have gleaned on Billy Budd has thus passed through the filter of the Lieutenant's interpretation that the handsome recruit's apparent gaiety conceals resentment.

2. When Billy resolves, after seeing the flogging of another novice, "never to merit reproof," his "punctiliousness in duty" (p. 346) is laughed at by his topmates. Billy tries desperately to make his actions coincide with his desire for perfect irreproachability, but he nevertheless finds himself "getting into petty trouble" (p. 346). Billy's "unconcealed anxiety" is considered "comical" by his fellows (p. 347). It is thus Billy's obsessive concern with his own perfection that starts a second snowball rolling, since Claggart undertakes a subtle campaign of petty persecutions "to try the temper of the man" (p. 358). The instrument used by Claggart to set "little traps for the worriment of the foretopman" is a corporal called "Squeak," who, "having naturally enough concluded that his master could have no love for the sailor, made it his business, faithful understrapper that he was, to foment the ill blood by perverting to his chief certain innocent frolics of the good-natured foretopman, besides inventing for his mouth sundry contumelious epithets he claimed to have overheard him let fall" (p. 357). Again, Claggart perceives Billy only through the distortion of an unfavorable interpretation.

3. With this impression of Billy already in his mind, Claggart proceeds to take Billy's spilling of the soup across his path "not for the mere accident it assuredly was, but for the sly escape of a spontaneous feeling on Billy's part more or less answering to the antipathy on his own" (p. 356). If this is an over-reading, it is important to note that the critical tendency to see sexual or religious symbolism in the soup scene operates on exactly the same assumption as that made by Claggart: that what
appears to be an accident is actually motivated and meaningful. Claggart's spontaneous interpretation, hidden behind his playful words ("Handsomely done . . ."), is not only legitimate enough on its own terms, but receives unexpected confirmation in Billy's naïve outburst: "There now, who says that Jemmy Legs is down on me!" This evidence of a preexisting context in which Claggart, referred to by his disrespectful nickname, has been discussed by Billy with others—apparently a number of others, although in fact it is only one person—provides all the support Claggart needs to substantiate his suspicions. And still, he is willing to try another test.

4. Claggart sends an afterguardsman to Billy at night with a proposition to join a mutinous conspiracy of impressed men. Although Billy rejects the invitation, he does not report it as loyalty demands. He is thus protecting the conspirators. Claggart's last test has been completed: Billy is a danger to the ship. In his function as chief of police, it is Claggart's duty to report the danger.

This "reversed" reading is no more—but certainly no less—legitimate than the ordinary "good vs. evil" interpretation. But its very possibility—evoked not only by these behind-the-scenes hints and nuances but also by the "garbled" newspaper report—can be taken as a sign of the centrality of the question of reading posed not only by but also in the text of Billy Budd. Far from recounting an unequivocal "clash of opposites" the confrontation between Billy and Claggart is built by a series of minute gradations and subtle insinuations. The opposites that clash here are not two characters but two readings.

V. THREE READINGS OF READING

It is no doubt significant that the character around whom the greatest critical dissent has revolved is neither the good one nor the evil one but the one who is explicitly presented as a reader, Captain Vere. On some level, readers of Billy Budd have always testified to the fact that it is reading, as much as killing, that is at the heart of Melville's story. But how is the act of reading being manifested? And what, precisely, are its relations with the deadliness of the spaces it attempts to comprehend?

As we have noted, critical readings of Billy Budd have generally divided themselves into two opposing groups, the "testament of acceptance" school on the one hand and the "testament of resistance" or "irony" school on the other. The first is characterized by its tendency to take at face value the narrator's professed admiration of Vere's sagacity.

THE EXECUTION OF BILLY BUDD

and the final benediction of Vere uttered by Billy. The second group is characterized by its tendency to distance the reader's point of view from that of any of the characters, including the narrator, so that the injustice of Billy's execution becomes perceptible through a process of reversal of certain explicit pronouncements within the tale. This opposition between "acceptance" and "irony" quite strikingly mirrors, as we mentioned earlier, the opposition within the story between Billy's naivety and Claggart's paranoia. We will therefore begin our analysis of Melville's study of the nature of reading with an examination of the way in which the act of reading is manifested in the confrontation between these two characters.

It seems evident that Billy's reading method consists in taking everything at face value, while Claggart's consists in seeing a mantrap under every daisy. Yet in practice, neither of these methods is rigorously upheld. The naive reader is not naive enough to forget to edit out information too troubling to report. The instability of the space between sign and referent, normally denied by the naive reader, is called upon as an instrument whenever that same instability threatens to disturb the content of meaning itself. Billy takes every sign as transparently readable as long as what he reads is consistent with transparent peace, order, and authority. When this is not so, his reading clouds accordingly. And Claggart, for whom every sign can be read as its opposite, neglects to doubt the transparency of any sign that tends to confirm his own doubts: "the master-at-arms never suspected the veracity" (p. 357) of Squeak's reports. The naive believer thus refuses to believe any evidence that subverts the transparency of his beliefs, while the ironic doubter forgets to suspect the reliability of anything confirming his own suspicions.

Naivety and irony thus stand as symmetrical opposites blinded by their very incapacity to see anything but symmetry. Claggart, in his antipathy, "can really form no conception of an unreciprocated malice" (p. 358). And Billy, conscious of his own blamelessness, can see nothing but pleasantness in Claggart's pleasant words: "Had the foretopman been conscious of having done or said anything to provoke the ill-will of the official, it would have been different with him, and his sight might have been purged if not sharpened. As it was, innocence was his blinder" (p. 366). Each character sees the other only through the mirror of his own reflection. Claggart, looking at Billy, mistakes his own twisted face for the face of an enemy, while Billy, recognizing in Claggart the negativity he smothers in himself, strikes out.

The naive and the ironic readers are thus equally destructive, both of themselves and of each other. It is significant that both Billy and Claggart should die. Both readings do violence to the plays of ambiguity and
belief by forcing upon the text the applicability of a universal and absolute law. The one, obsessively intent on preserving peace and eliminating equivocation, murders the text; the other, seeing nothing but universal war, becomes the spot on which aberrant premonitions of negativity become truth.

But what of the third reader in the drama, Captain Vere? What can be said of a reading whose task is precisely to read the relation between naivety and paranoia, acceptance and irony, murder and error? For many readers, the function of Captain Vere has been to provide "complexity" and "reality" in an otherwise "oversimplified" allegorical confrontation:

Billy and Claggart, who represent almost pure good and pure evil, are too simple and too extreme to satisfy the demands of realism; for character demands admixture. Their all but allegorical blackness and whiteness, however, are functional in the service of Vere's problem, and Vere, goodness knows, is real enough.26

Billy Budd seems different from much of the later work, less "mysterious," even didactic. . . . Its issues seem somewhat simplified, and, though the opposition of Christly Billy and Satanic Claggart is surely diagrammatic, it appears almost melodramatic in its reduction of values. Only Captain Vere seems to give the story complexity, his deliberations acting like a balance wheel in a watch, preventing a rapid, obvious resolution of the action. . . . It is Vere's decision, and the debatable rationale for it, which introduces the complexity of intimation, the ambiguity.27

As the locus of complexity, Captain Vere then becomes the "balance wheel" not only in the clash between good and evil but also in the clash between "accepting" and "ironic" interpretations of the story. Critical opinion has pronounced the Captain "vicious"28 and "virtuous,"29 "self-mythifying"30 and "self-sacrificing,"31 "capable"32 and "cow-

30. Widmer, p. 33.
32. Weir, p. 121.
ardly,”33 “responsible”34 and “criminal,”35 “moral”36 and “perverted,”37 “intellectual”38 and “stupid,”39 “moderate”40 and “authoritarian.”41 But how does the same character provoke such diametrically opposed responses? Why is it the judge that is so passionately judged?

In order to analyze what is at stake in Melville’s portrait of Vere, let us first examine the ways in which Vere’s reading differs from those of Billy Budd and John Claggart:

1. While the naive/ironic dichotomy was based on a symmetry between individuals, Captain Vere’s reading takes place within a social structure: the rigidly hierarchical structure of a British warship. While the naive reader (Billy) destroys the other in order to defend the self, and while the ironic reader (Claggart) destroys the self by projecting aggression onto the other, the third reader (Vere) subordinates both self and other, and ultimately sacrifices both self and other, for the preservation of a political order.

2. The apparent purpose of both Billy’s and Claggart’s readings was to determine character: to preserve innocence or to prove guilt. Vere, on the other hand, subordinates character to action, being to doing: “A martial court,” he tells his officers, “must needs in the present case confine its attention to the blow’s consequence, which consequence justly is to be deemed not otherwise than as the striker’s deed” (p. 384).

3. In the opposition between the metaphysical and the psychoanalytical readings of Billy’s deed, the deciding question was whether the blow should be considered accidental or (unconsciously) motivated. But in Vere’s courtroom reading, both these alternatives are irrelevant: “Budd’s intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose” (p. 389). What matters is not the cause but the consequences of the blow.

4. The naive or literal reader takes language at face value and treats signs as motivated; the ironic reader assumes that the relation between sign and meaning can be arbitrary and that appearances are made to be

33. Withim, p. 126.
34. Weir, p. 121.
35. L. Thompson, p. 386.
38. Weir, p. 121.
39. Thompson, p. 386.
41. Widmer, p. 29.
reversed. For Vere, the functions and meanings of signs are neither transparent nor reversible but fixed by socially determined *convention*. Vere’s very character is determined not by a relation between his outward appearance and his inner being but by the “buttons” that signify his position in society. While both Billy and Claggart are said to owe their character to “Nature,” Vere sees his actions and being as meaningful only within the context of a contractual allegiance:

Do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King’s officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true, that in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents. When war is declared are we the commissioned fighters previously consulted? We fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence. (p. 387)

Judgment is thus for Vere a function neither of individual conscience nor of absolute justice but of “the rigor of martial law” (p. 387) operating through him.

5. While Billy and Claggart read spontaneously and directly, Vere’s reading often makes use of precedent (historical facts, childhood memories), allusions (to the Bible, to various ancient and modern authors), and analogies (Billy is like Adam, Claggart is like Ananias). Just as both Billy and Claggart have no known past, they read without memory; just as their lives end with their reading, they read without foresight. Vere, on the other hand, interrogates both past and future for interpretative guidance.

6. While Budd and Claggart thus oppose each other directly, without regard for circumstance or consequence, Vere reads solely in function of the attending historical situation: the Nore and Spithead mutinies have created an atmosphere “critical to naval authority” (p. 380), and, since an engagement with the enemy fleet is possible at any moment, the *Bellipotent* cannot afford internal unrest.

The fundamental factor that underlies the opposition between the metaphysical Budd/Claggart conflict on the one hand and the reading of Captain Vere on the other can be summed up in a single word: history. While the naïve and the ironic readers attempt to impose upon language the functioning of an absolute, timeless, universal law (the sign as *either* motivated or arbitrary), the question of *martial* law arises within the story precisely to reveal the law as a *historical* phenomenon, to underscore-
the element of contextual mutability in the conditions of any act of reading. Arbitrariness and motivation, irony and literality, are parameters between which language constantly fluctuates, but only historical context determines which proportion of each is perceptible to each reader. Melville indeed shows history to be a story not only of events but also of fluctuations in the very functioning of irony and belief:

The event *converted into irony for a time* those spirited strains of Dibdin. . . . (p. 333)

Everything is *for a term venerated* in navies. (p. 408)

The opposing critical judgments of Vere’s decision to hang Billy are divided, in the final analysis, according to the place they attribute to history in the process of justification. For the ironists, Vere is misusing history for his own self-preservation or for the preservation of a world safe for aristocracy. For those who accept Vere’s verdict as tragic but necessary, it is Melville who has stacked the historical cards in Vere’s favor. In both cases, the conception of history as an interpretive instrument remains the same: it is its *use* that is being judged. And the very fact that Billy Budd criticism itself historically moves from acceptance to irony is no doubt itself interpretable in the same historical terms.

Evidence can in fact be found in the text for both pro-Vere and anti-Vere judgments:

Full of disquietude and misgiving, the surgeon left the cabin. Was Captain Vere suddenly affected in his mind? (p. 378)

Whether Captain Vere, as the surgeon professionally and privately surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford. (p. 379–80)

That the unhappy event which has been narrated could not have happened at a worse juncture was but too true. For it was close on the heel of the suppressed insurrections, an aftertime very critical to naval authority, demanding from every English sea commander two qualities not readily interfusable—prudence and rigor. (p. 380)

Small wonder then that the *Bellipotent’s* captain . . . felt that circumspection not less than promptitude was necessary. . . . Here he may or may not have erred. (p. 380)

The effect of these explicit oscillations of judgment within the text is to underline the *importance* of the act of judging while rendering its outcome undecidable. Judgment, however difficult, is clearly the central preoc-
ocupation of Melville’s text, whether it be the judgment pronounced by Vere or upon him.

There is still another reason for the uncertainty over Vere’s final status, however: the unfinished state of the manuscript at Melville’s death. According to editors Hayford and Sealts, it is the “late pencil revisions” that cast the greatest doubt upon Vere; Melville was evidently still fine-tuning the text’s attitude toward its third reader when he died. The ultimate irony in the tale is thus that our final judgment of the very reader who takes history into consideration is made problematic precisely by the intervention of history: by the historical accident of the author’s death. History here affects interpretation not only within the content of the narration but also within the very production of the narrative. And what remains suspended by this historical accident is nothing less than the exact signifying value of history itself. Clearly, the meaning of “history” as a feature distinguishing Vere’s reading from those of Claggart and Budd can in no way be taken for granted.

VI. JUDGMENT AS POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

When a poet takes his seat on the tripod of the Muse, he cannot control his thoughts. . . . When he represents men with contrasting characters he is often obliged to contradict himself, and he doesn’t know which of the opposing speeches contains the truth. But for the legislator, this is impossible: he must not let his laws say two different things on the same subject.

Plato, The Laws

In the final analysis, the question is not: what did Melville really think of Captain Vere? but rather: what is at stake in his way of presenting him? What can we learn from him about the act of judging? Melville seems to be presenting us less with an object for judgment than with an example of judgment. And the very vehemence with which the critics tend to praise or condemn the justice of Vere’s decision indicates that it is judging, not murdering, that Melville is asking us to judge.

And yet Vere’s judgment is an act of murder. Captain Vere is a reader who kills, not, like Billy, instead of speaking, but rather, precisely by means of speaking. While Billy kills through verbal impotence, Vere kills through the very potency and sophistication of rhetoric. Judging, in Vere’s case, is nothing less than the wielding of the power of life and death through language. In thus occupying the point at which murder and language meet, Captain Vere positions himself precisely astride the

“deadly space between.” While Billy’s performative force occupies the vanishing point of utterance and cognition, and while the validity of Claggart’s cognitive perception is realized only through the annihilation of the perceiver, Captain Vere’s reading mobilizes both power and knowledge, performance and cognition, error and murder. Judgment is precisely cognition functioning as an act. It is this combination of performance and cognition that defines Vere’s reading not merely as historical but as political. If politics is defined as the attempt to reconcile action with understanding, then Melville’s story offers an exemplary context in which to analyze the interpretive and performative structures that make politics so problematic.

That the alliance between knowledge and action is by no means an easy one is amply demonstrated in Melville’s story. Vere indeed has often been seen as the character in the tale who experiences the greatest suffering: his understanding of Billy’s character and his military duty are totally at odds. On the one hand, cognitive exactitude requires that “history” be taken into consideration. Yet what constitutes “knowledge of history”? How are “circumstances” to be defined? What sort of causality does “precedent” imply? And what is to be done with overlapping but incompatible “contexts”? Before deciding upon innocence and guilt, Vere must define and limit the frame of reference within which his decision is to be possible. He does so by choosing the “legal” context over the “essential” context:

In a legal view the apparent victim of the tragedy was he who had sought to victimize a man blameless; and the indisputable deed of the latter, navally regarded, constituted the most heinous of military crimes. Yet more. The essential right and wrong involved in the matter, the clearer that might be, so much the worse for the responsibility of a loyal sea commander, inasmuch as he was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis. (p. 380)

Yet it is precisely this determination of the proper frame of reference that dictates the outcome of the decision: once Vere has defined his context, he has also in fact reached his verdict. The very choice of the conditions of judgment itself constitutes a judgment. But what are the conditions of choosing the conditions of judgment?

The alternative, it seems, is between the “naval” and the “primitive,” between “Nature” and “the King,” between the martial court and what Vere calls the “Last Assizes” (p. 388). But the question arises of exactly what the concept of “Nature” entails in such an opposition. In what way, and with what changes, would it have been possible for Vere’s
allegiance to be to "Nature"? How can a legal judgment exemplify "primitive" justice?

In spite of his allegiance to martial law and conventional authority, Vere clearly finds the "absolute" criteria equally applicable to Billy's deed, for he responds to each new development with the following exclamations:

"It is the divine judgment of Ananias!" (p. 378)

"Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (p. 378)

"Before a court less arbitrary and more merciful than a martial one, that plea would largely extenuate. At the Last Assizes it shall acquit." (p. 388)

"Ay, there is a mystery; but, to use a scriptural phrase, it is a 'mystery of iniquity,' a matter for psychological theologians to discuss." (p. 385)

This last expression, which refers to the source of Claggart's antipathy, has already been mentioned by Melville's narrator and dismissed as being "tinctured with the biblical element":

If that lexicon which is based on Holy Writ were any longer popular, one might with less difficulty define and denominate certain phenomenal men. As it is, one must turn to some authority not liable to the charge of being tinctured with the biblical element. (p. 353)

Vere turns to the Bible to designate Claggart's "nature"; Melville turns to a Platonic tautology. But in both cases, the question arises: what does it mean to seal an explanation with a quotation? And what, in Vere's case, does it mean to refer a legal mystery to a religious text?

If Vere names the Absolute—as opposed to the martial—by means of quotations and allusions, does this not suggest that the two alternative frames of reference within which judgment is possible are not Nature and the King, but rather two types of textual authority: the Bible and the Mutiny Act? This is not to say that Vere is "innocently" choosing one text over another, but that the nature of "Nature" in a legal context cannot be taken for granted. Even Thomas Paine, who is referred to by Melville in his function as proponent of "natural" human rights, cannot avoid grounding his concept of nature in Biblical myth. In the very act of rejecting the authority of antiquity, he writes:

The fact is, that portions of antiquity, by proving every thing, establish nothing. It is authority against authority all the way, till
we come to the divine origin of the rights of man, at the Creation. Here our inquiries find a resting-place, and our reason a home.43

The final frame of reference is neither the heart nor the gun, neither Nature nor the King, but the authority of a Sacred Text. Authority seems to be nothing other than the vanishing-point of textuality. And Nature is authority whose textual origins have been forgotten. Even behind the martial order of the world of the man-of-war, there lies a religious referent: the Bellipotent's last battle is with a French ship called the Athée.

Judgment, then, would seem to ground itself in a suspension of the opposition between textuality and referentiality, just as politics can be seen as that which makes it impossible to draw the line between “language” and “life.” Vere, indeed, is presented precisely as a reader who does not recognize the “frontier” between “remote allusions” and current events:

In illustrating of any point touching the stirring personages and events of the time he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as he would be to cite from the moderns. He seemed unmindful of the circumstance that to his bluff company such remote allusions, however pertinent they might really be, were altogether alien to men whose reading was mainly confined to the journals. But considerateness in such matters is not easy to natures constituted like Captain Vere's. Their honesty prescribes to them directness, sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier. (p. 341)

Yet it is precisely by inviting Billy Budd and John Claggart to “cross” the “frontier” between their proper territory and their superior's cabin, between the private and the political realms, that Vere unwittingly sets up the conditions for the narrative chiasmus he must judge.

As was noted earlier, Captain Vere's function, according to many critics, is to insert “ambiguity” into the story's “oversimplified” allegorical opposition. Yet at the same time, it is precisely Captain Vere who inspires the most vehement critical oppositions. Captain Vere, in other words, seems to mobilize simultaneously the seemingly contradictory forces of ambiguity and polarity.

In his median position between the Budd/Claggart opposition and the acceptance/irony opposition, Captain Vere functions as a focus for the conversion of polarity into ambiguity and back again. Interestingly, he plays exactly the same role in the progress of the plot. It is Vere who

brings together the "Innocent" Billy and the "guilty" Claggart in order to test the validity of Claggart's accusations, but he does so in such a way as to effect not a clarification but a reversal of places between guilt and innocence. Vere's fatherly words to Billy are precisely what triggers the ambiguous deed upon which Vere must pronounce a verdict of "condemn or let go." Just as Melville's readers, faced with the ambiguity they themselves recognize as being provided by Vere, are quick to pronounce the Captain vicious or virtuous, evil or just; so, too, Vere, who clearly perceives the "mystery" in the "moral dilemma" confronting him, must nevertheless reduce the situation to a binary opposition.

It would seem, then, that the function of judgment is to convert an ambiguous situation into a decidable one. But it does so by converting a difference within (Billy as divided between conscious submissiveness and unconscious hostility, Vere as divided between understanding father and military authority) into a difference between (between Claggart and Billy, between Nature and the King, between authority and criminality). A difference between opposing forces presupposes that the entities in conflict be knowable. A difference within one of the entities in question is precisely what problematizes the very idea of an entity in the first place, rendering the "legal point of view" inapplicable. In studying the plays of both ambiguity and binarity, Melville's story situates its critical difference neither within nor between, but precisely in the very question of the relation between the two as the fundamental question of all human politics. The political context in Billy Budd is such that on all levels the differences within (mutiny on the warship, the French revolution as a threat to "lasting institutions," Billy's unconscious hostility) are subordinated to differences between (the Bellipotent vs. the Athée, England vs. France, murderer vs. victim). This is why Melville's choice of historical setting is so significant: the war between France and England at the time of the French Revolution is as striking an example of the simultaneous functioning of differences within and between as is the confrontation between Billy and Claggart in relation to their own internal divisions. War, indeed, is the absolute transformation of all differences into binary differences.

It would seem, then, that the maintenance of political authority requires that the law function as a set of rules for the regular, predictable misreading of the "difference within" as a "difference between." Yet if, as our epigraph from Plato suggests, law is thus defined in terms of its repression of ambiguity, then it is itself an overwhelming example of an entity based on a "difference within." Like Billy, the law, in attempting to eliminate its own "deadly space," can only inscribe itself in a space of deadliness.
In seeking to regulate the violent effects of difference, the political work of cognition is thus an attempt to situate that which must be eliminated. Yet in the absence of the possibility of knowing the locus and origin of violence, cognition itself becomes an act of violence. In terms of pure understanding, the drawing of a line between opposing entities does violence to the irreducible ambiguities that subvert the very possibility of determining the limits of what an “entity” is:

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity. In pronounced cases there is no question about them. But in some supposed cases, in various degrees supposedly less pronounced, to draw the exact line of demarcation few will undertake, though for a fee becoming considerable some professional experts will. There is nothing nameable but that some men will, or undertake to, do it for pay. (p. 379)

As an act, the drawing of a line is not only inexact and violent: it is also that which problematizes the very possibility of situating the “difference between” the judge and what is judged, between the interests of the “expert” and the truth of his expertise. What every act of judgment manifests is not the value of the object but the position of the judge within a structure of exchange. There is, in other words, no position from which to judge that would be outside the lines of force involved in the object judged.

But if judging is always a partial reading (in both senses of the word), is there a place for reading beyond politics? Are we, as Melville’s readers, outside the arena in which power and fees are exchanged? If law is the forcible transformation of ambiguity into decidability, is it possible to read ambiguity as such, without that reading functioning as a political act?

Even about this, Melville has something to say. For there is a fourth reader in Billy Budd, one who “never interferes in aught and never gives advice” (p. 363): the old Dansker. A man of “few words, many wrinkles,” and “the complexion of an antique parchment” (p. 347), the Dansker is the very picture of one who understands and emits ambiguous utterances. When asked by Billy for an explanation of his petty troubles, the Dansker says only, “Jemmy Legs [Claggart] is down on you” (p. 349). This interpretation, entirely accurate as a reading of Claggart’s ambiguous behaviour, is handed down to Billy without further explanation:
Something less unpleasantly oracular he tried to extract; but the old
sea Chiron, thinking perhaps that for the nonce he had sufficiently
instructed his young Achilles, pursed his lips, gathered all his wrin-
kles together, and would commit himself to nothing further. (p. 349)

As a reader who understands ambiguity yet refuses to "commit himself,"
the Dansker thus dramatizes a reading that attempts to be as cognitively
accurate and as performatively neutral as possible. Yet however neutral
he tries to remain, the Dansker's reading does not take place outside the
political realm: it is his very refusal to participate in it, whether by
further instruction or by direct intervention, that leads to Billy's exclama-
tion in the soup episode ("There now, who says Jemmy Legs is
down on me?"). The transference of knowledge is not any more in-
ocent than the transference of power. For it is precisely through the
impossibility of finding a spot from which knowledge could be all-
embracing that the plays of political power proceed.

Just as the attempt to "know" without "doing" can itself function as
a deed, the fact that judgment is always explicitly an act adds a further
insoluble problem to its cognitive predicament. Since, as Vere points
out, no judgment can take place in the Last Assizes, no judge can ever
pronounce a Last Judgment. In order to reach a verdict, Vere must
determine the consequences not only of the fatal blow, but also precisely
of his own verdict. Judgment is an act not only because it kills, but
because it is in turn open to judgment:

"Can we not convict and yet mitigate the penalty?" asked the
sailing master. . . .

"Gentlemen, were that clearly lawful for us under the circum-
stances, consider the consequences of such clemency. . . . To the
people the foretopman's deed, however it be worded in the an-
nouncement, will be plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of
mutiny. What penalty for that should follow, they know. But it
does not follow. Why? They will ruminate. You know what sailors
are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore?" (p. 389)

The danger is not only one of repeating the Nore mutiny, however. It
is also one of forcing Billy, for all his innocence, to repeat his crime.
Billy is a politically charged object from the moment he strikes his
superior. He is no longer, and can never again be, plotless. If he were
set free, he himself would be unable to explain why. As a focus for the
questions and intrigues of the crew, he would be even less capable of
defending himself than before, and would surely strike again. The political reading, as cognition, attempts to understand the past; as performance, it attempts to eliminate from the future any necessity for its own recurrence.

What this means is that every judge is in the impossible position of having to include the effects of his own act of judging within the cognitive context of his decision. The question of the nature of the type of historical causality that would govern such effects can neither be decided nor ignored. Because of his official position, Vere cannot choose to read in such a way that his reading would not be an act of political authority. But what Melville shows in *Billy Budd* is that authority consists precisely in the impossibility of containing the effects of its own application.

As a political allegory, Melville’s *Billy Budd* is thus much more than a study of good and evil, justice and injustice. It is a dramatization of the twisted relations between knowing and doing, speaking and killing, reading and judging, which make political understanding and action so problematic. In the subtle creation of Claggart’s “evil” out of a series of spaces in knowledge, Melville shows that gaps in cognition, far from being mere absences, take on the performative power of true acts. The force of what is not known is all the more effective for not being perceived as such. The crew, which does not understand that it does not know, is no less performative a reader than the Captain, who clearly perceives and represses the presence of “mystery.” The legal order, which attempts to submit “brute force” to “forms, measured forms,” can only eliminate violence by transforming violence into the final authority. And cognition, which perhaps begins as a power play against the play of power, can only increase, through its own elaboration, the range of what it tries to dominate. The “deadly space” or “difference” that runs through *Billy Budd* is not located between knowledge and action, performance and cognition: it is that which, within cognition, functions as an act: it is that which, within action, prevents us from ever knowing whether what we hit coincides with what we understand. And this is what makes the meaning of Melville’s last work so . . . striking.

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