Billy Budd or, The Ambiguities

by

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Dedication

To my husband, Martin, and to my children, Anita and Michael, whose caring and loving made my work possible . . .

To Charles Child Walcutt, who first turned my eyes toward American literature in general and Billy Budd in particular; who guided, supported, and helped me every step of the way with unending patience and enthusiasm, and without whom this study would not have been accomplished . . .

To David Gordon whose gentle criticism and thoughtful ways enriched and expanded the scope of this dissertation . . .

To Wendell Johnson, a special note of heartfelt thanks . . .

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Preface

Thirty years after Melville's death a copy of Billy Budd was uncovered quite accidentally tucked away among other Melville papers. In the years since its discovery, this famous story has more than made up for its former obscurity by the interest it has stirred, an interest that has extended beyond literary scholarship to include the production of a play on the subject, the filming of a movie called Billy Budd, and the composition of an opera based on Melville's story. From the moment of its publication in 1924, Billy Budd has commanded both recognition and continued interest, but despite the extensive attention given to this tale since its emergence, it guards its secrets well.

It is not certain, for example, whether Herman Melville ever considered the work complete. Indeed, scholars such as Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts, authors of a comprehensive genetic text, believe that it was never finished. Elizabeth Melville, Melville's wife, lived on for many years after his death, and although her handwriting on some leaves of the manuscript attests to the fact that she knew of its existence, she never brought it to light. Why she failed to pursue its publication is another unanswered question. But the enigma concerning the history of its manuscript is dwarfed by the essential question that has

been the subject of scholarly debate since Billy Budd took its place in the American literary canon. How are we to interpret Herman Melville's attitude toward Captain Vere in Billy Budd?

Part fable, part morality play, part sea adventure, part history, and partly the story of three "exceptional" men, Billy Budd is a work that has persistently resisted a consensual reading. It is further complicated by a richness of philosophical themes concerning such concepts as: good and evil; idealism and realism; the conflict of the individual and society; war and peace. But underlying this story and perhaps partly responsible for its almost special capacity to move us deeply, are intensely personal themes that extend beyond the confines of legality, morality, and psychology. The profoundly human conflicts between the principal characters, such as the "father and son" relationship in particular, lend vital force to the story, a strength and energy that seem to tap mythic roots. If Billy Budd has cast a spell on its readers, it has probably done so by touching hidden depths in each of us.

When the work was first published, critics felt that the action of Captain Vere in the story demonstrated that Melville, in his last years, had finally come to terms with the painful necessity that in order for society to exist, law must be upheld, no matter how terrible the cost. The proponents of this interpretation of Billy Budd, generally

referred to as Melville's "testament of acceptance," went virtually unopposed for many years. Now, however, the initial success of this interpretation has been seriously eroded by the more recent "testament of resistance" school of thought whose adherents condemn Vere for taking the life of an innocent boy in order to uphold the law. Even more recently, a third group has appeared on the scene whose critical stance is somewhere between the two earlier ones. They generally see the opposing elements in Billy Budd to be in an uncertain balance, and the characters and actions to be regarded in less absolute terms. Others of this third group describe Melville's story as infused with compassion for a man involved in a painful moral dilemma; they feel that Melville was not really making a clear-cut judgment in Billy Budd, nor did he mean the reader to. Billy Budd and its "definitive" interpretation continue to be the object of a relentless and, evidently, inconclusive pursuit by its admirers.

While the "testament of resistance" school of interpretation has been somewhat blunted by the third scholarly position, which could be generally described as a more balanced view, there seems to be a substantial body of circumstantial evidence that has not been sufficiently investigated which suggests that the "testament of resistance" still presents the stronger case.

One set of circumstances that has been commonly over-

looked is the history of the literary criticism of Billy Budd. This work, although its last revision was undertaken in the year of Melville's death, 1891, was not published until 1924. It was, in effect, a nineteenth-century work reviewed only by twentieth-century critics. This study will discuss the implications of this unusual critical history in which a work from the sensibility of one century was confronted by scholars of a later period with different interests and assumptions from those which prevailed in 1891. Another line of inquiry closely allied to the literary history of Billy Budd is an analysis of the possible effects of Melville's milieu on the working out of the story. An analysis of the ambience of the last two decades of the nineteenth century in which Melville lived and worked during the last years of his life, lends weight to the belief that Melville was critical of Captain Vere rather than accepting or nonjudgmental.

A search for harbingers of Billy Budd in the Melville canon itself has not been sufficiently pursued. In all the important works of Melville precursors of Billy Budd can be found which seem to support the thesis that Captain Vere's defense of legislated law over higher moral law would not have been regarded favorably by Melville. Many critics discount these clues. In noting Melville's weakening of principles from his earlier fiction to his last work, they attribute this change to the lapse of thirty-five years be-

tween Billy Budd and his previous works of fiction. A time lapse, however, no matter how extensive, does not of necessity explain change - nor do the infirmities of old age. To assume that a man's change in attitudes can be attributed simply to aging is too facile a judgment. Man, as he ages, bends, inclines, twists - but he rarely reverses his fundamental beliefs. In exploring the other works in the Melvill canon, we find evidence pointing to the fact that Melville was consistently critical of men who relied on custom, form, or law to mandate their decisions. Traces of Billy Budd in Melville's other works strongly suggest that Herman Melville, so increasingly tormented by the malign nature of the universe, could not have approved of a man who destroys whatever goodness and beauty existed in his own world. This is further confirmed by an anlysis of the poems that Melville was working on while he was brooding over Billy Budd.

Another set of circumstances that merits attention centers around the death of Melville's first son by a self-inflicted bullet wound at the age of eighteen. Melville outlived both his sons, and this abnormal inversion of the process of generations may have strongly colored the treatment of Billy Budd and the title figure's relationship to Captain Vere. This line of questioning leads to the possibility that Melville injected into the figure of Captain Vere many of his own feelings about his life which was, at the time

of writing, coming to a close. Embedded in the text of Billy Budd is what can be conceived of as an oblique summary of Melville's life, his appraisal of himself as an artist, as a man, as a son, and most importantly, as a father, all of which tend to suggest that Melville was highly critical of Captain Vere.

The unique critical history of the work, the ambience in which Melville worked from 1886 to 1891, the precursors of Billy Budd detected in Melville's other works, and the intense emotional investment in the characters of Billy Budd and Edward Vere, all build a considerable body of circumstantial evidence to bolster the "testament of resistance" critical school. But the structure of Billy Budd adds more. More than one half of the book, the first part, is taken up with a direct introduction of characters; the action of the story takes place in the second half. The method that Melville uses to present the principal characters seems to establish a kind of moral hierarchy in which the value of each man is revealed by the order and position in which he is presented. Although each character stands independently, the relation of each to the figures surrounding him produce a moral illumination. An examination of the structure of the first half of Billy Budd offers further support to the adherents of the "testament of resistance" theory, by suggesting that Melville closed his career and his life not with acceptance and

forgiveness, but with rancor and bitterness. This tale, closely tied in feeling and in concerns to the earlier works of Herman Melville, reveals that the author's point of view never changed from its initial statement in Typee to its last reaffirmation in Billy Budd.

Chapter I

The Problems of Billy Budd

The story of Billy Budd is fairly simple. A young sailor is falsely accused of fomenting a mutiny and strikes out at his accuser thereby accidentally killing him. He is adjudged guilty of murdering an officer and is hanged. The principal characters are few: the young sailor, Billy Budd; his accuser, John Claggart; and the captain of the ship, Edward Vere. Such a simple fable should be immune to ambiguity, but the context of this apparently simple story is vast enough to generate many complex questions, so much so that "ambiguity" has almost become synonomous with Billy Budd. Indeed, that word has been repeated so often in discussions of this tale that scholars must sometimes suppress a yawn when that word is used again, but there is no question that despite the great interest of readers in the work, and despite the multiple revisions of the story by Herman Melville, Billy Budd poses important critical problems. There are real ambiguities in the handling of the story that are not imposed by the readers; they exist in the text itself.

E. M. Forster explains that the story of a novel is simply the sequence of events in time, important but relatively easy to follow. Complexity arises in the plot, for

it is the plot of the novel that makes us ask "why,"[1] and Billy Budd comes with many "why's." Why did the captain of the ship, a rational and reasoning man, become so irrational when a common seaman accidentally killed an officer? Why did Captain Vere hang Billy Budd when he knew that he was innocent of any malice? How did Billy Budd retain his innocence despite his experience as a sailor? Why was Claggart's evil so beyond understanding that it required a special definition? Why did Vere insist on setting up a drumhead court at sea when he could have waited to have Billy court-martialed on shore? Why did he claim to fear a mutiny when there was absolutely no evidence of one on board his ship? The main source of these vexing problems and others is in Melville's troubling presentation of Captain Vere, but there are other sources of ambiguity that arise out of the structure of the story itself as well as in the presentation and actions of the other principal characters.

Simon Lesser suggests that structure is sometimes used as a clouding device so that "certain meanings, those most likely to produce anxiety, will not emerge too clearly."[2] Whether or not this was true of Melville's use of structure, it is true that in addition to the "why's" of the plot, the structure of the story poses certain problems that complicate the interpretation of Billy Budd. The first half of

the story is taken up with a description of the characters and only glancingly touches the story line. After a leisurely introduction of the characters, with digressions on Lord Nelson and the Nore Mutiny slowing the pace even further, the unhurried development of the first half of the story is accelerated to a precipitous rush of events in the second half. We move from the confrontation in Captain Vere's stateroom to the killing, to the trial, to the execution, with barely a pause. There is one exception; chapters twenty and twenty-one are devoted to a questioning of sanity, beginning with a focus on Captain Vere and moving to more general speculations on the subject. We sense that this subject must have been very important to Melville if it made him interrupt the rapid action of the second half of the story, but we remain puzzled as to its final meaning.

More specifically, chapter twenty is devoted to the surgeon's questioning of the sanity of Captain Vere, whereas the introductory lines of chapter twenty-one ask where the line between sanity and insanity can be drawn. Because both digressions speculate on the precarious nature of human sanity, the reader could assume that the author wishes him to question the sanity of Captain Vere. This direction of thought, however, is qualified by the following statement:

> 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 considerate some professional experts will. There is nothing namable but that some men will, or undertake to, do it for pay.[3]

The honesty and competence of the surgeon are thrown into question and the reader is only left with an unanswered question.

The digressions on Nelson and the Nore Mutiny in the first half of the story do not interrupt the leisurely pace. They can be justified as usefully enriching the setting in which the story unfolds. Citing these historical events also serves the purpose of making Billy Budd less a parable than it often seems to be, and more a "realistic" drama of the sea. These discussions however, occupy a considerable number of pages considering the brevity of the story itself. The description of Nelson diminishes the portrait of Captain Vere even though no explicit cross references are made. It is also possible, however, that citing the exploits of one heroic figure in the navy serves to glorify naval figures as a whole, as if they were standing in reflected glory. Which was Melville's intention?

In these digressions, Melville dwells at some length on the mutiny on the Nore and its aftermath. He also mentions, but only briefly, the Somers' affair in which three young men had been charged with mutiny and in which his cousin had been a central figure. The events on the Somers parallel the events of Billy Budd very closely; it is a

story that Melville knew personally as well as historically, yet he barely mentions it. Is it simply that the Nore mutiny took place in the English navy and the Somers in the American navy, or is it that the details of the Somers so closely approximated those on the Bellipotent in Billy Budd that Melville thought that much would be revealed that he would prefer to have remain hidden?

The five chapters that end Billy Budd also add to the interpretive problems. Although they are codas to the rush of events that culminate in the execution of Billy, their relationship to the rest of the story is unclear; instead of clarifying, they obscure. Chapter twenty-six dramatizes a discussion between the purser and the surgeon as to the reason for a lack of "spasmodic movement" on the part of Billy's body after he is hanged, throwing a cloud of mystery on the moment of his death. Coming after the glorious description of Billy "ascending" into the clouds, the exchange between the purser and the surgeon, evidently ironic, tends to elevate the previous scene by contrast in tone; it also compels the reader to reconsider the hanging scene, thereby emphasizing the special nature of Billy's death. The chapter seems to be saying that there are aspects of Billy's dying that cannot be adequately explained, that go beyond our understanding.

There are, however, a number of other considerations about chapter twenty-six that should be noted. According

to Hayford and Sealts, the conversation between the surgeon and the purser originally began "in the same paragraph in which Billy's motionless hanging is told" (p. 265). Melville then transformed it into a separate chapter and inserted it between the hanging and chapter twenty-seven which deals with the response of the men after witnessing the execution. But in so doing Melville distorts the time sequence. Chapter twenty-five is the actual hanging; chapter twenty-six, the discussion of the surgeon and the purser takes place "some days afterwards" (p. 124) and chapter twenty-seven begins at the "moment of execution" (p. 125). If chapters twenty-five and twenty-seven are read in sequence, and according to Hayford and Sealts they were both written at the same stage (Fa) in the manuscript (p. 265), then the impact on the reader is heightened. Melville's later insertion of the chapter on the surgeon and the purser confuses the time sequence and interrupts the reader's response to Billy's hanging.

The "scientific" discussion between the purser and the surgeon also echoes, albeit briefly, the question put to Vere at the trial as to the possible motivation of Claggart. The idea that there is some "mystery" in the matter of Claggart's accusation of Budd does not emanate from Vere. The officer of marines initiates the idea that there is something "mysterious in this matter," and Vere, evidently too literal minded to initiate such a line of thinking,

then responds, "'I see your drift'" (p. 108). Vere claims that this is a "'matter for psychologic theologians'" and that with "'the prisoner's deed - with that alone we have to do'" (p. 108). Just as Vere disclaims any need to pursue the "mysterious"in the matter of Claggart and Budd, the surgeon avoids the question of the purser by claiming that terms such as "will power" and "euthanasia" are not authentic "scientific" terms being "at once imaginative and metaphysical" (p. 125), and he also refuses to pursue the idea. Is there any connection that Melville wishes us to make between Vere's avoidance of concerns that go beyond the surface of things, and the surgeon's obviously superficial way of thinking?

Chapter twenty-seven describes the immediate reaction of the sailors to Billy's death. When Captain Vere suspects that they may react adversely, he has the drumroll call them to quarters. Vere speculates on the use of "forms, measured forms" (p. 128) to control spontaneity of feeling that, in this case, may become dangerous. The tone of this chapter is so even, so nonjudgmental, that the reader does not know whether this act of Vere's in tightening control over the sailors is to be viewed with admiration or with disapproval.

Captain Vere's death is recounted in chapter twenty-eight. We are told that he dies on land from a wound he received in a naval battle, a battle that was finally won

by his second in command: "under him the enemy was finally captured" (p. 129). We are reminded by mention of the Nile and Trafalgar that Vere never achieved the greatness of Nelson. We are also told that dying, in a drugged state, he murmurs the name, "'Billy Budd,'" but as if to stave off sympathy, Melville then tells us that Vere speaks Billy's name with no remorse. Does lack of remorse indicate that Vere has remained consistent in his view that "however pitilessly. . . law may operate in any instance, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it" (p. 111), or does lack of remorse indicate that Captain Vere achieved a higher reconciliation with Billy Budd? The statement is couched in negative terms; the name of Budd was spoken "not [in] the accents of remorse" (p. 129) as if Melville were anticipating the reader's expectation that Vere should feel some remorse. But how the words were actually spoken is left unsaid. Does the lack of remorse partly imply Vere's reconciliation with himself, a conclusion that he has done the right thing after all?

Despite Vere's lack of remorse and his rather inglorious end, the scene of his death is a moving one. We feel a sense of sadness and compassion at his dying with Billy's name on his lips. For a moment, he becomes a tragic figure. The effect of the chapter suggests to the reader the possibility that Vere and Billy were reconcilled at their last meeting. Chapter twenty-eight, therefore, serves to stir

the reader's emotions, but the feelings aroused simultaneously pull in opposite directions. In Vere's dying, in his remembering Billy, we remember his anguish and pity him, but we also recall that his harshness and rigid application of principles caused Billy's death. We feel both sets of emotions. Was this Melville's intention?

In the following chapter, twenty-nine, naval chronicles retell the events aboard the Bellipotent in such a way that the roles of Claggart and Billy are distorted. The report is accurate in that Billy killed Claggart, but inaccurate in that Billy was not "the ringleader" of "some sort of plot," nor should he be described as a "criminal" of "extreme depravity" (p. 130). In fact, Melville spends a chapter explaining Claggart's evil as "depravity." The report is further distorted by omitting Captain Vere's name, the man who was the pivotal figure in the story, the man who conducted the trial and execution of Billy Budd. Hayford and Sealts' analysis is that Melville "neglected to revise the news account. . .specifically to mention the fact of Vere's death in addition to the deaths of Claggart and Budd" (p. 8). In a recent article, Stanton Garner claims that Melville "deliberately introduced error" throughout the story "to encourage the complacent reader to accept error as truth, fiction as fact, folly as wisdom."[4]

Either out of neglect or deliberately on Melville's part, the naval chronicles distort the truth. Melville

devotes a chapter to this "human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd" (p. 131). The effect, I suggest, is to force the reader himself to reevaluate the events he has just read and to apportion praise and blame according to his own perception of the story. But underlying this chapter are hints for the reader; "true" guilt and innocence were reversed, the term "depravity" was applied to the "wrong" man in the chronicles, according to the narrator's own telling, and the man who could have altered the outcome was totally overlooked.

Chapter thirty, which ends the story, begins with a description of the sailors' veneration of Billy Budd, as they retell and embellish the story. The ballad of "Billy in the Darbies" closes the story. Parts of this ballad were written before Melville began the story in prose; so some of the misinformation, such as the implication that Billy was guilty, is probably a leftover from Melville's original conception. The ballad, as the naval chronicles, confuses the issues. It serves to remind us that it is difficult to know the truth, officially or in legend; it suggests that ultimately life holds mysteries that cannot be resolved. But perhaps most importantly, the ballad that ends with the words, "I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist," arouses our compassion and sense of loss.

Later in this study, many of these structural problems,

the digressions, the measured beginning pace of the story that changes abruptly in the second half, the concluding chapters, will be shown to reveal meaning, rather than obscure it. There are questions, however, other than those concerning form that arise out of the text. For example, the descriptions of young Billy color and affect the entire story from the moment he appears. His glow is a permanent presence. Why is the young sailor invested with such intense love? We might suppose the author realized that the poignancy of the situation would be intensified and the difficulty of the decision for Captain Vere would be increased if the young sailor were a figure of unearthly beauty, physically and spiritually. In a simple sea story, however, the superlatives that describe him are very unconventional. Billy is compared to Alexander, Apollo, Hercules, and Achilles. He is Adam before the Fall, Joseph, and Isaac. The rough sailors call him "rose," and "jewel," and "beauty." He dies as a god dies; the description suggests that he is gathered up into the heavens. Even his death has a mystery about it that leaves us unsure as to the appropriate response.

Billy, despite his near perfection, has a blemish, one that Melville claims is a "striking instance that the arch interferer . . . has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of Earth" (p. 53). Billy's stutter, his flaw, is compared by Melville in the story to

the woman in Hawthorne's The Birthmark (p. 53). While Melville is apparently claiming that Billy's imperfection is a mark of Satan, there is another aspect to the flaw. Earlier, Melville had marked in his own copy of Mosses from an Old Manse the lines from The Birthmark which commented that even the most elevated of human beings is "kindred with the lowest . . ."[5] and the flaw thereby becomes a mark of brotherhood, rather than a pejorative, or possibly both.

The effect of the stammer is to precipitate the crisis of the story, but it is also effective in making Billy more vulnerable, more childlike in some way. This is reinforced by Vere's associating it with that of a "bright young schoolmate of his" (p. 99). In a later chapter of this study, a comparison of the events in Melville's life with the story of Billy Budd will suggest that Billy was dealt with so lovingly partly because he resembled Melville's oldest son who had also died in young adulthood.

There seems to be little mystery about Claggart's portrayal, despite his action being explained in terms of a "mystery of iniquity." Melville goes to great lengths to establish Claggart as a consummate villain. He is depraved "according to nature;" his evil is baseless, without motive or reason. After we are convinced of his evil essence, however, some feelings of Claggart's are revealed, some vague suggestions of motives and reasons for his behavior that affect the previous descriptions. Claggart, looked at

Billy, whom he would have loved except for "fate and ban," with "soft yearning" (p. 88). He is depicted as "the man of sorrows" (p. 88), a strange Christ-like comparison for the most evil of men. These contradictions exist simultaneously in the text as undeniable evidence that Claggart, while the "reverse of a saint" (p. 74), had occasional twinges of feeling that infringed on his dark nature. The explanation could be that Melville wanted to make the character more human, more balanced, less likely to be interpreted allegorically. Just as Billy Budd has a flaw, his stutter, Melville gives Claggart a few moments of warm human feelings to prove that he is an actual man, not to be regarded as the devil incarnate. But the devices used to soften him are rather special. For example, some event could have been narrated to illustrate a generous act of Claggart's towards another member of the crew, or something in his past could have been mentioned to demonstrate a human quality. Instead, Melville chose to depict him as reaching out to the saintly Billy, and compares him momentarily to Christ. Melville used a bolt a lightning where a spark would have served his purpose if his purpose was merely to humanize Claggart. But perhaps Melville's intention was to invite us to see Billy Budd and Claggart in some important relationship rather than the simple opposition of good and evil. David Gordon suggests that "Billy's nature is freedom from conflict (innocence), [while] Claggart's is one of

guilt and conflict."[6] Their difference, according to Gordon, "is the level of sophistication, the degree to which a sense of guilt has been admitted into consciousness . . . for the story has it that guilt is inseparable from civilization."[7] Billy's participation in Claggart's satanic nature, as manifested by his blemish, and Claggart's sharing of Billy's saintly nature, in his Christ-like qualities, brings the two "opposites" closer than events show. But the evil in the universe, in man particularly, has always been a central concern of Melville's, and Claggart has many ancestors spread throughout Melville's other works. Some of the puzzling aspects of Claggart's development can be clarified by a careful scrutiny of the Melville canon.

A line or two more about Claggart. After his death, there is no further mention of him; he disappears both actually and fictionally. This is strange in light of the fact that Melville spent so many lines explaining his character and his relationship to Billy Budd. Some critics have suggested that Claggart's disappearance and the emergence of Vere as the central character represents, for Melville, a letting go of evil and an acceptance of the necessities of living in the real world. It is a manifestation of his "testament of acceptance." Others, including Edwin Eigner, suggest that Claggart's abrupt exit does not disturb the flow of the story because in Melville's novels, which

Eigner calls metaphysical, "thematic characters with roughly equivalent values can substitute for one another when the exigencies of plot require."[8] This seems to imply a close relationship of Vere and Claggart in "values" as Vere takes over the prosecution of Billy which Claggart sets in motion.

All these problems in structure and character delineation make Billy Budd unsettling for the reader, who is often uncertain as to what is the appropriate response at a given moment. It is even more unsettling to realize that, despite the graphic visualization of goodness and evil confronting each other in Billy Budd and Claggart, the most pressing interpretive problems focus on neither of them, but on the reader's perception of Captain Vere. Some readers assert that Captain Vere is a virtuous paragon who maintained law and order by painfully quelling his personal feelings. Others, just as insistently, claim that he is a villain who knowingly destroyed a beautiful, innocent boy. Still others believe that the ambiguities are deliberately set up by Melville to avoid rejecting or condemning Captain Vere's action.

Captain Vere, the moral and philosophical axis upon which the tale rotates, does not emerge as a central figure in the story until the third and final phase in the writing of Billy Budd. Hayford and Sealts explain that the first phase depicted a man about to be hanged for mutiny;

in the second phase, that man becomes a youth unjustly accused of mutiny by an evil officer; in the third phase Captain Vere assumed his position on center stage and the emphasis of the story shifts from a confrontation of the contending forces of good and evil to the incredibly complex battle of good and evil in the mind and conscience of a man. Without the conflict that Vere undergoes, the one we see unfolding at the trial, the story could be read as a simple tale of good wrestling with an evil that initially emerges victorious until it is ultimately destroyed itself. Captain Vere's presence, however, transforms Billy Budd from an apparently uncomplicated story, simple enough so that two of the principal figures could almost be represented by moral equivalents, to a tale involved with a conflict that has never ceased to trouble mankind - the conflict between the individual and society.

The development of the story's complexity evidently went hand in hand with a thickening in the character of Captain Vere. In describing Pierre's anguished working over his book in Pierre, Melville explains, "that which now absorbs the time and life of Pierre is not the book, but the primitive elementalizing of the stronger stuff, which in the act of attempting that book has upheaved and upgushed in his soul."[9] Henry Murray explains in an introduction to Pierre that the work was one in which "Melville's disposition was to yield to the racing tide of the unconscious."[10]

Melville's spokesman in Mardi says of a famous writer, "He did not build himself in with plans; he wrote right on, and so doing, got deeper and deeper into himself."[11] Similarly, the deeper Melville got into Billy Budd, as he worked and reworked those same pages again and again, the more Captain Vere emerged as the fulcrum of the story. Melville's statements in Mardi and Pierre demonstrate that for himself the process of writing was a process of diving, of reaching into the deeper layers of memory and feeling.

If Billy Budd is the link connecting all the characters in that he is the disturbing factor introduced on the warship, precipitating the action, Captain Vere is the controlling figure. By virtue of his being captain he has power of life and death over all the men on his ship, all the power implicit in the rank of captain. He also shares some of the qualities of all the characters on board the Bellipotent. He is father to Budd, in feeling and behavior. He is linked to Graveling and Nelson in that all three represent the possibilities in the role of a captain, Graveling the "humane ideal," and Nelson the "heroic ideal."[12] (Vere fails to reach either.) The Dansker, like Vere, is a failed father who knows the truth but does not stop the tragedy. Vere is part of Claggart in that Claggart, as his master-at-arms, is his extension, his disciplinarian, his direct link-up with the men on board, but more importantly Vere shares a greater number of significant personal and moral charac-

teristics with Claggart than with any other figure in the story.

A review of the revisions of Billy Budd demonstrates that in Melville's mind Vere and Claggart were very closely interconnected, although this does not in and of itself mean that Melville felt that they were similar. Hayford and Sealts note that in the third and final version of the developing story when Vere becomes of prime importance, "Melville made very little change in his treatment of Billy [although] he continued to restate and rework the details of his already extensive analysis of Claggart" (p. 8). Evidently, the earlier passages "tend to represent Vere favorably" (p. 35), but as Vere was further developed, so was Claggart; when Melville "built up Vere [he] then once again reworked his analysis of Claggart" (p. 243). Since Vere and Claggart confront each other only once in Billy Budd, it is interesting that Melville evidently visualized them so tightly hooked together that he could not write about one without expanding on the other. It was as if qualities of Vere had linkages with qualities of Claggart in Melville's mind.

The diversity of action, ideas, and emotions manifested by Captain Vere are such that it is as if there were two men that made up the captain, both trying to assume dominance, each alternating and clashing with the other as events dictated. His personal characteristics are stated one way, only to be contradicted later. Vere's description at the begin-

ning of the story tells us how he differs from the other ship officers, and naval officers in general, by virtue of family, education, and personal habits, but the action of the story demonstrates that he sticks more closely to naval usages, forms, and rules than do the others. When he is aboard ship dressed as the captain, he is accepted in that role; when he changes clothes, he appears otherwise. We are told that he has the welfare of his men in mind, but he is a rigid disciplinarian. His demeanor keeps him aloof from the officers of his ship and more so from the crew. Vere usually appears calm and controlled, but if he is disturbed while musing, he suddenly turns edgy.

His actions, his ideas, and his feelings are equally confusing. In the story he sets up the meeting between Claggart and Billy in the privacy of his cabin to investigate the accusation made by Claggart without causing undue alarm; he also believes that under these circumstances it will be easier for Claggart to be confronted. He goes to these lengths to protect Billy, but he acts at the trial to destroy the young sailor. He keeps the trial secret to prevent stirring up or alarming the crew, but executing the men's favorite does just the opposite. At the trial Vere argues in favor of following the law while his emotions pull against what he is saying. Gordon's assertion that "there appears to have been in Melville himself an underly-

ing revulsion against Vere's decision, which works against his deliberate effort to make the decision seem regrettably necessary" is helpful in understanding the effect of the scene on the reader.[13]

Vere's actions in the crisis seem to be based on rational principles, but his behavior appears to be irrational, almost "unhinged" according to the ship's surgeon. In supporting the importance of following the law, of adhering to traditional courses of action, he himself breaks a convention when he forms a drumhead court rather than bringing Billy before an admiral's court-martial which the surgeon, the lieutenants, and the captain of marines all feel is the usual, the proper course of action (p. 102). Captain Vere has the courage and independence to stand up for what he claims to believe in, to oppose the crew, the members of the court, and even his own "private conscience." But Captain Vere is standing alone because he is defending those parts of the social structure that tend to destroy the integrity of the individual, such as the military establishment and its code, and the law that exercises the ultimate control over the individual. In his stance of the individual heroically confronting opposing forces, Captain Vere could not be more conventional and dependent in thought and action. In some ways he personifies the deterioration of the American Dream - the individual who thinks he is acting independently when he is actually bound and gagged by society's

mandates and external pressures.

The man portrayed by Melville is simultaneously flexible and rigid, kind and cruel, rational and irrational, independent and dependent, and arbitrary while adhering to the rules. While all complex human beings evince paradoxical behavior on occasion, Captain Vere's extreme polarities seem more than a manifestation of complexity or density of character. Some opposites can be reconciled, but such an abundance of contraries makes for problems in understanding the nature of such a man, as well as the intention of the writer who created him.

The split between Vere's actions and feelings is, of course, a primary source of confusion in our attempt to grasp Melville's intent in Billy Budd, because the meaning of this puzzling work is irrevocably tied to the meaning of Captain Vere. Robert Rogers resolves the problem to his own satisfaction by explaining that overlying the entire work are the varying images of a father figure, each important character playing one aspect of this role which, according to Rogers, is Melville's central concern. Graveling is the gentle father; the Dansker is the advisor; the chaplain has a paternal gentleness; Nelson portrays the idealized nautical patriarch; Claggart acts a "father by virtue of authority;" and Vere is "old enough to have been Billy's father."[14]

Other critics have also been aware of this apparent splintering of the character of Captain Vere and have explained it in a variety of ways. Paul Brodtkorb suggests that Billy Budd's vagaries chronicle a "divided consciousness . . . [because of the] reading and reflection and changing thought and attitudes of the years of revision."[15] Gordon feels that the story represents the author's "successive attempts to identify with [Billy, Claggart, and Vere]."[16]

F. O. Matthiessen suggests that the "struggle between Claggart and Billy is reenacted on a wholly different plane within the nature of Vere itself."[17] Mitchell claims that "both Billy and Claggart are doubles of Vere, corresponding with the light and dark sides of their captain . . . the conflict between Claggart and Billy externalizes the struggles occurring within Vere."[18] Roger Shattuck says that in

> Melville's story we are symbolically carried inside the microcosm of one individual broken into three parts: Captain Vere standing for the pride of both reason and authority, Claggart, who represents 'depravity according to nature,' and Billy, who embodies ingenuous goodness. None of the three is pure, and none is a whole man.[19]

Lawrance Thompson's controversial Melville's Quarrel with God sees Vere as an unjust God, Budd as Christ, and Claggart as Satan.

Billy Budd is not the only work in which Melville splits a personality into some of its component parts. Indeed, he seems particularly inclined to work in this manner

when he creates a character with whom he perhaps feels intimately connected, with whom he shares personal qualities such as Ahab, and Pierre, and Captain Vere. Henry Murray's critique of Moby-Dick claims that Ahab is Melville's id, his instincts that society tries to repress; Starbuck is the "rational realistic Ego . . . overpowered by the fanatical compulsiveness of the Id and dispossessed of its normal regulating function;"[20] and the white whale is the superego that Ahab must destroy,

> the zealous parents whose righteous sermonizings and corrections drove the prohibitions in so hard that a serious young man could hardly reach outside the barrier, except possibly far away among some tolerant, gracious Polynesian peoples.[21]

In Murray's analysis, Ahab and Melville are difficult to separate.

In Pierre, Lucy and Isabel can be regarded, on a superficial level, as different facets of Pierre's personality struggling for domination, one all love and compliance, the other the dark passion of the unconscious. It has been pointed out that while the reader feels the great conflict between Isabel and Lucy, Melville does not actually dramatize Lucy and Isabel in conflict; "the main struggle takes place in Pierre's mind."[22] Murray takes the concept of Isabel and Lucy as opposites in Pierre's mind a step further. He claims that everything Pierre "condemns in the external world is a projection of his shadow self."[23]

> Pierre's incestuous inclinations are more sinful than his father's amorousness; his deception of Lucy and his mother exceeds his father's; his pride ends by towering above his mother's; his hostility goes beyond Glenstanley's. Thus Pierre's vision of the world shows less correspondence to the world of his day than it does to the contents of his unconscious.[24]

Throughout all this commentary, Murray is obviously interpreting Pierre as an equivalent or alter ego of Melville himself and although Pierre is a fictional character, the parallels between the events in the book and those in Melville's life, make it reasonable to suggest that Pierre represented Melville in many significant ways.

As did other writers before and after him, Melville split his important characters into many components. In literature the device of dividing a major character serves to reveal the inner workings of a complex being. It is a method that examines and displays, that brings order to disorder. In Don Quijote and Sancho Panza are represented spirit and body, ideal and real; in Prince Mishkin and Rogozin in Dostoyevsky's The Idiot, purity and innocence are juxtaposed to their supposed opposites, sensuality and appetite. Dostoyevsky, however, describes the mutual feelings these men share, showing that they are somehow mysteriously and irrevocably bound to each other although they appear to be so totally opposite in character and in actions. While each is obviously assigned an allegorical meaning, their initial attraction for one another, their increasing need

for each other as shared circumstances bring them closer together, and the deep emotional hold of each upon the other goes beyond allegory. Their very polarity of character suggests that each lacks what the other has in such abundance; that together they would make a more natural, if perhaps less interesting, man.

In "The Poet and Day-Dreaming," Freud states that the "psychological novel in general probably owes its peculiarities to the tendency of modern writers to split up their ego by self observation into many component-egos, and in this way personify the conflicting trends in their own mental life in many heroes."[25] Thinking along similar lines, Robert Rogers suggests that "when an author wishes to depict mental conflict within a single mind a most natural way for him to dramatize it is to represent that mind by two or more characters. Such a technique is a natural one whether the author is aware of what he is doing or not."[26]

Freud and Rogers both claim that the writer, by splitting the principal character into its component parts, either "personifies the conflicting trends" in his inner life, or uses the components to reveal facets of the principal character, to "depict mental conflict within a single mind." Writing itself evidently can be a means of self-examination, either overtly or covertly. Steven Marcus suggests that Freud wrote and re-wrote what has become known as the "Case of Dora" because he was not clear about his own

role in the case. Freud's writing it out, according to Marcus, became a way of coming to terms with what he evidently could not understand in his own actions and reactions towards Dora. Marcus claims that Freud wrote and re-wrote the case study because "he had not yet, so to speak, gotten rid of it; that he had to write it out, in some measure, as an effort of self-understanding."[27]

The possibility exists that Melville, consciously or unconsciously, saw in Vere different tendencies in his own personality; that Vere became, in some aspects, a personification of his own feelings and experiences. Hanns Sachs claims that the poet "finds the pattern for all his characters in himself."[28] The tale of Captain Vere perhaps became for Melville a summation, and possibly a judgment of his own life. In Vere is a failed father who destroyed the youth he adored as a son; both of Herman Melville's sons died young, and both died before achieving some goal in life. Another aspect of the character of Vere is a failed son who died ignored, unrecognized, with his ambitions unrealized. Herman Melville failed as a son in that both his father and mother never valued him as they did his brother, Gansevoort. Herman was called by his father "backward in speech and somewhat slow in comprehension."[29] When compared to his brother, Herman was rather apologetically termed "more sedate but not less interesting."[30] Herman, in school, was regarded by his father as maintaining a

"respectable standing . . . without being a bright scholar," while his brother was called a "distinguished classical scholar."[31] Melville's father died when the young boy was just entering adolescence and Herman never had the opportunity to win his father's love and admiration. Similarly, Vere died before he proved himself; he was moderately admired by other captains who conceded that "His Majesty's navy mustered no more efficient officer of their grade than Starry Vere" (p. 109), but he never achieved greatness. Overlapping the Vere-Melville failure as a son is the Vere-Melville failure as an artist. Melville died in obscurity, barely given obituary space in the newspapers. His letters during the last years of his life convey his sense of fading away, as if he knew how little the world would mark his passing. In just the same way, Vere was totally overlooked in the naval chronicles that ironically sum up the events on the Bellipotent, totally forgotten as the man who was central to those events.

Other characters seem to bring to life other "conflicting trends" in Melville's inner life, reflecting "mental conflicts" that were perhaps never resolved. In Captain Graveling is the father he wished to be, in Nelson the recognition he never received. In Billy Budd is the young Herman searching for the love and approbation of his father, a man who withheld it until the day he died. In Billy Budd is Melville's son, Malcolm, who died by a self-inflicted

bullet wound at the age of eighteen. In Claggart is the anger of Herman Melville toward a society that does not like him, that in some sense contrives to keep him out. In Claggart is a part of Melville's self that he subdues, his fury and his yearning, his reaching out and pulling back, his desire to be loved, and his hostility toward those who do not return his intense feelings. Billy Budd is rich because it deals with what William Faulkner called "the human heart in conflict with itself."[32]

Much of this is, of course, speculation, but speculation based on problems that create ambiguity within the story as told by Herman Melville. It goes far to explain why Captain Vere is so endlessly fascinating and so difficult to understand, why the descriptions of Billy Budd and Claggart are so charged with emotion. All these themes, all these experiences from the storage of a lifetime converge in Billy Budd, enriching its texture while complicating its meaning.

Notes

[1] E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1949), pp. 82-83.

[2] Simon Lesser, Fiction and the Unconscious (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 125.

[3] Herman Melville, Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative), ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 102. All subsequent citations from Billy Budd and from the commentaries of Hayford and Sealts will be from this edition, with the page references immediately following.

[4] Stanton Garner, "Fraud as Fact in Herman Melville's Billy Budd," San Jose Studies, 4 (1978), 83-105.

[5] As noted by F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), p. 253.

[6] David J. Gordon, Literary Art and the Unconscious (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 125.

[7] Ibid., p. 134.

[8] Edwin M. Eigner, Metaphysical Novel in England and America: Dickens, Bulwer, Melville, and Hawthorne (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 90. Eigner defines metaphysical novelists as those who "did not use the story to discover a sense of life, but rather to express . . . a visionary understanding of life" (p. 171).

[9] Herman Melville, Pierre or The Ambiguities, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and Newberry Library, 1971), p. 304. All subsequent citations from Pierre will be from this edition with the page references immediately following.

[10] Henry Murray, Intro., Pierre or, The Ambiguities by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1957), p. xxvi.

[11] Herman Melville, Mardi and a Voyage Thither (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), IV, 326. All subsequent citations from Mardi will be from this edition, with the page references immediately following.

[12] Gordon, p. 143.

[13] Ibid., p. 140.

[14] Robert Rogers, "The Ineluctable Grip of Billy Budd," Literature and Psychology, 14 (1964), 12-13.

[15] Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., "The White Hue of Nothingness," PMLA, 82 (1967), 612.

[16] Gordon, p. 146.

[17] Matthiessen, p. 509.

[18] Charles Mitchell, "Melville and Spurious Truth of Legalism," The Centennial Review of Arts and Science, 12 (1968), 114.

[19] Roger Shattuck, "Two Inside Narratives: Billy Budd and L'Etranger," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 4 (1962), 319.

[20] Henry A. Murray, "'In Nomine Diaboli,'" The New England Quarterly, 24 (1951), 446.

[21] Ibid., p. 444.

[22] Robert Rogers, A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), p. 138.

[23] Murray, Intro. to Pierre, p. xciii.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey, Vol. IX (London: Butler and Tanner, 1959), p. 150.

[26] Rogers, Double in Literature, p. 29.

[27] Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora," Partisan Review, 41 (1974), 23.

[28] Hanns Sachs, The Creative Unconscious (Cambridge: Sci-Art Publishers, 1951), p. 44.

[29] Jay Leyda, The Melville Log, A Documentary Life of Herman Melville 1819-1891 (New York: Gordian Press, 1969), I, 25.

[30] Ibid., 32.

[31] Ibid., 43.

[32] William Faulkner, "Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature," in The Portable Faulkner, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1967), p. 723.

Chapter II

The Critical Heritage of Billy Budd

Billy Budd is a tale outside of its time - it is a nineteenth-century work bequeathed to a twentieth-century audience. Published outside of its time, reviewed outside of its cultural and historical context, Billy Budd and its "definitive" interpretation have been the object of a relentless and, evidently, inconclusive pursuit by its admirers. The inconclusive nature of the search may be partly related to the fact that this story was deprived of a traditional, progressive critical history. From Melville's last retouching of Billy Budd in 1891, the year of Melville's death, to its publication in 1924, thirty-three years intervened, years that had seen "the war to end all wars" become a meaningless bloodletting, ending in disillusionment and despair. The willingness of many critics to accept the notion that Billy Budd is Herman Melville's final testament, his final acceptance of society and its necessities at the expense of justice, is perhaps more an indirect commentary on the hopelessness of this century than an accurate appraisal of Melville's final statement.

If Billy Budd had been available for commentary in the nineteenth century, as in the order of events it might have been, the entire course of its criticism might have been

different. The century that resounded with the voices of Emerson and Thoreau calling on each man to follow the moral dictates of his heart, to follow the higher reason of the heart, would not have applauded the action of Captain Vere as readily as the twentieth century has. The preacher-teachers of the nineteenth century, the moral agitators, decried those who placed expediency over "right." In 1865, John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle found themselves in total opposition over a Black rebellion in British owned Jamaica that became a moral cause celebre, an affair that parallels Billy Budd in many interesting ways.[1] After massacring former slaves, Eyre, the appointed governor of the island, tried and executed a former magistrate by an improperly constituted court in order to shift blame for the insurrection from himself. Mill formed the Jamaica Committee to prosecute Eyre claiming that actions that are crimes in England cannot be considered merely unfortunate mistakes because they occur elsewhere. Carlyle, who in other regards had exercised so profound an influence on Emerson, proved to be an arch conservative and countered with an Eyre Defense Committee claiming that Eyre had been a hero for preventing anarchy and supporting the law, claims made for Captain Vere when Billy Budd first appeared. Perhaps the twentieth century can no longer believe what Emerson and Thoreau believed in America, and what Mill and his supporters believed in England. The nineteenth century, although a witness to the vast changes mechan-

ization had brought to the life of every man, still cherished strong moral beliefs and held them dear. Indeed, it has been pointed out that "the contrast between early political hope and later disillusion becomes the major theme of the twentieth-century political novel."[2]

Evidently in the twentieth century man has lost the possibility of redemption; our hope is just a little one; that society can continue to exist. When Faulkner concluded The Sound and the Fury with the words, "They endured," it was perhaps the most optimistic statement our century could muster at that time. Because of Billy Budd's publication in 1924, the only critics who have studied it have been men of this century. Does their interpretation reflect their own modern perception, or Melville's, that there is an ambiguity as to what is just and what is unjust? Wayne Booth discusses the literary history of The Turn of the Screw by claiming that "the first readers of The Turn never questioned the governess' integrity. Their habitual experience of narrative testimony led them to expect reliability unless unreliability were clearly proved." He continues by saying that by the 1920's, "readers became more and more sensitive about their oversights and suspicious of all claims to reliability."[3] The latest consensus seems to be that the governess is not reliable. The fluctuation in the interpretaion of The Turn apparently hinges on the milieu of the critic as well as the complexity of the text.

Critics and readers are imprinted by their own time and Billy Budd, brought to light in this century, was conceived in a time that was already past. Harry Levin noted in passing that "Billy Budd's deferred publication in our time, together with its sentimental appeal to some critics, may have disproportionately affected our understanding of Melville" in his last work of fiction, but Levin does not pursue the point.[4] Ordinarily, each piece of literature develops a critical history in a process that is evolutionary in nature. A critical history is not made, it develops. This never happened to Billy Budd; it was deprived of an orderly critical history, and this lack may have radically altered its initial critical reception as well as all those that followed.

The earliest critics, the ones who confronted Billy Budd for the first time in the twenties and thirties, contended that it was the summation of Melville's final views on the individual and society. His system of beliefs, they suggested, is contained in the actions of Captain Vere, actions that are justifiable because they preserve the structure of society and prevent chaos. But in the 1920's the critics were just coming to grips with the whole Melville canon. Melville, after all, had dropped out of the public view for about fifty years when Billy Budd first appeared. Not only did Billy Budd lack a proper critical history, but the critics were first coming to terms with works like Moby-Dick. In the 1920's what Melville meant, in any of his works, was

just beginning to dealt with seriously.

In 1933 Grant Watson coined the phrase that was to haunt Melville scholarship, that Billy Budd was Melville's "Testament of Acceptance,"[5] restating in another way what Lewis Mumford had claimed in 1929, that Melville cried out with Billy Budd, "God bless Captain Vere!"[6] According to Mumford and the others of this persuasion, Melville was "reconciled" to injustice at the end, accepting the situation as a tragic necessity. The interpretation of these critics may have reflected their own need for world peace, for the salvation of society. People were still pulling the world together after World War I, a war in which much was destroyed and little was settled, and Mussolini and Hitler were beginning to beat their drums.

This view of the meaning of Billy Budd was generally accepted until 1950, when Joseph Schiffman forced a revaluation. He claimed that Melville's last story was a "tale of irony" in which Captain Vere was not praised, but gently blamed. "At heart a kind man, Vere, strange to say, makes possible the depraved Claggart's wish . . . ."[7] Others were not so gentle, such critics as Caspar[8] and Glick[9] in 1952 and 1953, but Milton Stern in 1957 took a more moderate stand in his comparison of Claggart and Vere. Recognizing the many shared characteristics of Vere and Claggart, Stern claims that Claggart's action "can only result in chaos [but] Vere's might result in reformation. In this is the note of affirma-

tion . . . ."[10] Evidently Stern feels that Vere's actions had redeeming value in that they maintained the props of social order. By the later 1950's, however, blaming Vere became less controversial and critics, for example Withim in 1959, attacked Vere more vigorously. He claimed that "those in power such as Vere, should do all they can to resist the evil inherent in any institution or government."[11]

This new direction of criticism, accusatory towards Captain Vere, began to appear in publications in 1950. The period immediately preceeding 1950 had been shaken by the revelations of the Nuremberg Trials. The lesson of those trials was that man must do what is morally right, rather than what is dictated by law; each man himself must bear responsibility for his decisions. These conclusions were agonizingly demonstrated during the long months of the trial, but the enormity of the Nazi war crimes could not be absorbed quickly. The implications of what was happening in Nuremberg were not instantly reflected in critical perceptions, but the question of morality could no longer be escaped and by 1950, the change in critical point of view toward Captain Vere's role in Billy Budd became manifest.

The cultural historian John William Ward explains the mood of the 1950's in America by examining the great popular success of John Kennedy's Profiles in Courage. The appeal, according to Ward, was in its "insistence on the importance of individual action, and the courage to take that action."[12]

American society at that time was also reflected in such books as David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd and William Whyte's The Organization Man, books that described America's move from the "inner-directed man who looked to himself" to the "other-directed man" who responded to the expectations of society by conforming to them, by relying on them for security. Kennedy's book spoke to the belief that one man had the power to change the course of events if he only had the " courage of [his] convictions."[13] In other words, Americans welcomed a book in which the individual heroically responded to his own beliefs and reasserted the old tradition of independence from the dictates of society, vis-a-vis its laws and conventions. In the 1950's, America was beginning to again extol the individual who acts courageously, following only his own conscience. In contrast, the hero of Billy Budd, Captain Vere, states unequivocally that "forms" are everything, and that the individual must follow the law, whether it is just or not. It is not surprising, therefore, that the interpretation of Billy Budd began its change at this time, now repudiating a man who justified his action not by what was morally right, but by what was legally correct.

By the 1960's, the view of Vere as a villain gained more adherents. In 1960 Merlin Bowen described Vere's position as "standing with Claggart and against Billy."[14] In 1962 Ives declared Vere guilty because he had other choices of action available to him than trying and hanging Billy.[15]

Writers like Ralph Willett,[16] Kingsley Widmer,[17] Charles Mitchell,[18] and Karl Knight[19] saw horror in Vere's action. There were, of course, some exceptions to this trend such as Richard Harter Fogle's contention that the point of the story was an "awareness of complexity,"[20] and Werner Berthoff's view that "this is only a story, a narrative of 'what befell' certain men."[21] He describes Vere and Billy as "bound to one another in a complementary greatness of soul."[22] Another exception to the accusatory trend toward Vere was Edward Rosenberry who claimed, in 1965, that Billy Budd "was never conceived as a puzzle for our solution . . . but rather as a course of events for our contemplation."[23]

Most of these critical studies illustrate that by the 1960's the view of Vere as a villain had strengthened. This period of American history was dominated by the involvement of the United States in the conflict in Viet Nam, a conflict that daily forced upon the public conscience a weighing of the relationship of legality and morality, and a pondering of the question whether, indeed, such a relationship exists. Perhaps this relentless, insistent scrutiny of formerly unquestioned principles of right and wrong made the past interpretations of Billy Budd unacceptable to readers with the heightened sensibility of the 1960's, more acutely attuned to moral questions. In the 1950's the voices condemning Vere had been generally more gentle than they were in the 1960's. The reason could be that the United States, as a

nation, had not been directly involved in those crimes against humanity perpetrated by Fascism, but the direct participation in Viet Nam no longer allowed that comfortable "out."

More recent criticism has sought to shift the blame from Captain Vere as an individual personally responsible for grave decisions to the more impersonal portrait of a man corrupted by war and society. John Seelye claimed in 1970 that "truth, for Melville, is a question, not an answer."[24] Leon Seltzer, the same year, suggests that the conclusion of Billy Budd "shows [that] Melville's object [was] to distrust formal conclusions - there is no answer."[25] In a doctoral dissertation in 1974, Thomas Selsor sees Vere's function "primarily as an authorial device designed to heighten rather than resolve the controversy,"[26] and in 1976 Joyce Adler absolves Vere from blame by claiming that "Vere's question of sanity is the concrete poetic expression of Melville's long conception of war as the "'madness' in men."[27] Walter Reed in 1977 attempts to demonstrate that Melville is setting up a parallel between the forms of art and the forms of law and that each is "inadequate to get at the truth."[28] Marlene Longnecker has a similar view in claiming that "the problem for Vere and for Melville is how to act honorably given the tragic limitations of human knowledge."[29]

Again, there are exceptions to this trend toward less concern with moral issues, such as Marvin Mandell's claim that Billy Budd was destroyed much as Antigone was destroyed,

by a "law based not on human need but on a tyrant's fear."[30] H. Bruce Franklin, in a recent book, claims that "Vere stands for all Melville found most detestable, inhuman, and menacing; arbitrary authority; oppression; military tyranny; legalism . . . ."[31] But the works of Mandell and Franklin are exceptions, minor detours from an overwhelming tend in another direction, to shift blame from Vere as human being responsible for his actions, to Vere, a victim of overwhelming forces in society.

The preponderance of 1970 studies make it apparent that the decade of the 70's has processed Vere out of his humanity, out of his moral responsibility, which is, after all, the same thing. He has been synthesized by these critics into a figure who can no longer be blamed for his actions; he is responding to such various pressures as war, law, and society. The pressures, and not Captain Vere the man, must shoulder the guilt. The present decade of the twentieth century may find comfort in this convenient relinguishing of moral responsibility, but did Melville in his time?

All literature has a critical history that influences our perception of it. We may agree or disagree with past interpretations, we may try to begin afresh and disregard the previous evaluations of a literary work, but each work has a critical history with which we must contend. We build on it, change it, modify it, accept it, reject it, but we start with it.

For example, Jay Leyda introduces The Complete Stories of Herman Melville by claiming that most of the stories have been neglected and that this "unreasonable disregard is a hold-over from contemporary dismissals of these works."[32] Leyda, in discussing these stories, must push past these dismissals and justify his admiration now; he must deal with critical history. Similarly, in her introduction to The Confidence Man, Elizabeth S. Foster explains that

> . . . what chiefly makes this book available to the twentieth century as it was not to the nineteenth [is that] the literature of our time has worked changes in our vision and our taste. Symbolism, fantasy, the discovery of myth and dream of 'more reality, than real life itself can show' - these have undermined the realism beloved of the mid-nineteenth century.[33]

Involved in this change of critical perception is a change of literary taste, of course, but even in dealing with change of taste we are responding to past critical perceptions. Foster must probe the work with great care to come up with cogent reasons to justify a break with the critical past, and in this searching-out process the interpretation becomes thickened and richer.

If Billy Budd had had a more conventional literary/critical history, could Lewis Mumford have stated so authoritatively that Billy joined with Melville in cheering Captain Vere? If there had been a past critical evaluation that claimed that Captain Vere had made an immoral choice, Mum-

ford would have been more cautious in his estimate of Melville's meaning. In his Melville biography, Mumford does not demonstrate the basis for his reasoning - he asserts its truth. Could Grant Watson have called this story Melville's "testament of acceptance" if readers and critics had previously appraised the work as one in which the goodness of Captain Vere was questionable? Mumford and Grant, the originators of this line of thinking, may have ultimately arrived at the same interpretation with a full critical history behind Billy Budd, but they would have had to search the work, the Melville canon, and themselves much more profoundly before arriving at such conclusions.

Notes

[1] Michael St. John Packe, Life of John Stuart Mill (New York: Macmillan Co., 1954), pp. 465-72.

[2] Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (New York: Horizen Press, 1957), p. 205.

[3] Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 366-67.

[4] Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe Melville (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 194.

[5] E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," New England Quarterly, 6 (1933), 319-27.

[6] Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), p. 357.

[7] Joseph Schiffman, "Melville's Final Stage, Irony: A Re-examination of Billy Budd Criticism," American Literature, 22 (1950), 133.

[8] Leonard Caspar, "The Case of Captain Vere," Perspectives, 5 (1952), 146-152.

[9] Wendall Glick, "Expediency and Absolute Morality in Billy Budd," PMLA, 68 (1953), 103-10.

[10] Milton Stern, The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957), p. 234.

[11] Phil Withim, "Billy Budd: Testament of Resistance," Modern Language Quarterly, 20 (1959), 121.

[12] John William Ward, Red, White, and Blue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 148.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), p. 218.

[15] C. B. Ives , "Billy Budd and the Articles of War," American Literature, 34 (1962), 31-39.

[16] Ralph W. Willett, "Nelson and Vere: Hero and Victim in Billy Budd, Sailor," PMLA, 82 (1967), 370-76.

[17] Kingsley Widmer, "The Perplexed Myths of Melville's Billy Budd," Novel, 2 (1968), 25-35.

[18] Charles Mitchell, "Melville and the Spurious Truth of Legalism," The Centennial Review of Arts and Science, 12 (1968), 110-26.

[19] Karl F. Knight, "Melville's Variations on the Theme of Failure: 'Bartleby'and Billy Budd,"Arlington Quarterly, 2 (1969), 44-58.

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[32] Herman Melville, The Complete Stories of Herman Melville, ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Random House, 1949), p. ix.

[33] Herman Melville, The Confidence Man: His Masquerade, ed. Elizabeth S. Foster (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1954), p. xiv. All subsequent citationsfrom The Confidence Man and from the introduction by Elizabeth Foster will be from this edition, with the page references immediately following.

Chapter III

Billy Budd as a Nineteenth-Century Work

Literary criticism forms around the work itself, but it has another central component that greatly influences its outcome - the historical time in which the critic is writing. No writer, critical or creative, can divest himself of his times so that no matter how perceptive a reader we try to be, we can fail to grasp concepts that are alien to our own era, that are too dissonent to our own attitudes or ideas. Indeed, Philip Rahv once said that "it is literally impossible to understand what our scholars and critics were . . . saying . . . without accounting for it by the prevailing Zeitgeist."[1] This, of course, is relevant to Melville criticism as well. Watson Branch notes that Melville's reputation did not awake until the 1920's because

> the social and literary changes since Melville's books were first published created a new critical context in which his writings, especially Moby-Dick, were typically read as the record of a man's rebellion against the oppressive forces in his society.[2]

The creative writer lives and breathes the prevailing air; how influenced he is may be an individual matter, but influenced he is. In an attempt to compensate for Billy Budd's lack of a critical history, to set the work on a

firmer foundation, I propose to sketch briefly the "prevailing Zeitgeist," the temper, the trends of thought with which Melville was surrounded during the evolution of Billy Budd. By looking upon a particular moment in time, we can understand something of "the cultural pattern, the image of reality which men carry about in their heads."[3] We can then venture to speculate on the possible reception of Billy Budd if it had been subject to contemporary reviews, and then further speculate on how this might have affected the interpretation of Billy Budd.

Although Billy Budd was developed during the years of 1886 to 1891, to allow for a larger overview we can usefully expand our exploration to include the period from 1880 to 1899. In the Oxford History of the American People this twenty year span is characterized as one which brought radical changes to America. This is readily perceived by the fact that "in world economy, the United States in 1879 was still a country of extractive industries; by 1900 it had become one of the greater manufacturing nations of the world."[4] With this incredible expansion came incredible wealth and the corruption that inevitably follows, such corruption in government that in 1883 the first federal civil service commission was formed. But the reformers, who were everywhere fighting corruption and boss rule "accomplished little," according to Samuel Morison, because "organized wealth and professional politicians had too strong an

interest in keeping things as they were."[5]

The custom house in New York where Melville spent twenty years of his life, from 1866 to 1885, was a "notorious center and symbol of corruption in the United States civil service during many of the years in which he was associated with it."[6] It is commonly assumed that Melville led a reclusive life in his last years, going to and from his job in the custom house, unnoticed and, ostensibly, untouched by his associations here, but built into the workings of the custom house was a system of forcing contributions to the political coffers that made failure to obey tantamount to a dismissal, something Melville could ill afford. According to historical data on civil-service reform attempts, the custom house was a "genuine malign instrument of corruption with which he was forced to contend."[7]

This corruption in the custom house was by no means an isolated instance of the changes America was undergoing. Before the 1880's America had a deep faith in the "average man." He was the independent explorer-pioneer in Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales; he was Emerson's self-reliant American scholar; he was a pilot on the Mississippi; he was an uneducated boy in Huckleberry Finn; he was a heroic seaman called Bulkington, or Jack Chase, in Melville's works. These figures were rooted in the America belief that the world began anew in the United States, that the old world had

been consciously shunted aside to make way for a fresh beginning. The American Dream, according to Charles Child Walcutt, was the "transcendental ideal of freedom through knowledge which expressed America's belief in science and in physical progress as an image of spiritual progress."[8] Central in this image of endless possibilities for progress and improvement were the endless lands that spread to the west - unknown, rich in possibilities. Even though it was understood that this land ended at the Pacific Ocean, the sense of infinite and open opportunities for improvement permeated the American sensibility and, therefore, American literature.

By the 1880's, however, times had changed. Openness of possibility for the "average man" had shrunk before the growth of stronger and more powerful interests. This process accelerated until by 1890, according to Morison and Henry Steele Commanger, American society

> ...witnessed the largest number of strikes in any one year of the nineteenth century. Railroad regulation had proved all but futile, and the antitrust law was to be effective only against labor organizations. Discontent with the McKinley tariff was widespread, and the prospect of any effective reduction in duties dim. Money was tight, credit inflexible, and banking facilities inadequate. The political machinery was not geared to democracy; the Senate, chosen not by popular vote but by state legislatures, was the stronghold of special interests; the Supreme Court reflected the ideas of the privileged.[9]

Heroic figures of the common man began to disappear from the imagination of American writers because "these characters only appear in books at moments when they exist in life, or in images that are vitally present in the general mind."[10]

Vernon Parrington characterizes the period under discussion as one of awareness that the "earlier democratic aspirations had somehow failed," that although we held democracy to be our supreme ideal, we had never achieved it but had instead a "rather careless individualism that left society at the mercy of a rapacious middle class."[11] This was a time that had witnessed Rockefeller's combining of almost all the oil refineries into an awesome monopoly. This was the era of Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, and Jay Gould, figures who justified every move by the acquisition of wealth. There was no evidence of concern with the suffering of the workers; capitalism had approved, even lauded, the unethical maneuvers of these Titans. There was corruption in government, both local and federal, and all the so-called American examples of right action had been stepped on and kicked aside in the rush for the dollar. Walcutt describes the "new" America in these terms:

> The old goal of personal fulfillment deteriorates as the economic means have become ends . . . society depends upon technological powers to the point where individual freedom cannot be tolerated. The little man must be oriented and organ-

> ized to the machine. As he becomes more dependent upon it and as complexities multiply, society itself becomes part of a mechanism.[12]

To correct this deviation from the American Dream the conviction began to arise that we must somehow "take our bearing afresh and set forth on a different path to the goal."[13]

Literature, as always, both anticipated and reacted to the society outside. The heroic in fiction was no longer acceptable because it was no longer a real possibility in life. In its place "realism" became a central concern. Any work that demonstrated one man as inherently superior to another was eyed with suspicion. William Dean Howells, who led this groups of "realists," "denied the reality of genius, describing it as a myth kept up to intimidate the modest . . . it was undemocratic to maintain these suggestions of the more-than-human."[14] According to Larzar Ziff's interpretation of the standards of the late nineteenth century, "ideally, literature should be accessible to those who cared to enjoy it."[15]

Hand in hand with realism, in actuality part of the same movement, came the regional story-teller such as Bret Harte from California, Mark Twain from the Mississippi and the West, and Southern writers such as Cable. As Parrington explained it, "in fixing attention on narrow and homely fields they were turning towards realism, for the charm of their work lay in fidelity to the milieu, the exact por-

trayal of character and setting."[16] Despite the ostensible realism in regional literature, as Larzar Ziff points out, there was the sense that the social conditions that were often exposed were "extraneous to the true moral standards which motivate action and which, ideally, triumph."[17] But many contemporary critics of the day, such as Henry C. Vedder, believed that

> . . . such emphasis as Howells and James were placing on reality and on the pre-eminence of technique obscured for many an American reader the all-important moral standard . . . Anything which blurred this standard and suggested that moral decisions were complex was vicious and foreign in origin.[18]

Even though Vedder was criticized for his views, expressed in his 1894 American Writers of Today, by a reviewer who claimed that Vedder's criticism was "mostly of the obvious current sort and hardly rises above the commonplace,"[19] Vedder's ideas are important exactly because they were "common." They reflected a voice that "was an important element in the climate of the nineties as was the benign encouragement of young artists by Howells . . . . The voice was the voice of a decency which most Americans cherished as their peculiar contribution to the culture of the world."[20]

Charles Dudley Warner in an article for the April 1883 issue of Atlantic Monthly claimed that the realists were, "in the higher sense . . . immoral, for they tend to lower the moral tone and stamina of every reader."[21] In an inter-

esting analysis of the pursuit of the "great American novel" in the last half of the nineteenth century, Herbert Brown claims that nearly universal was the belief that "plot as a whole involves the presence of evil as a disintegrating factor, but it rests its strength on the superior might of goodness which in some shape triumphs at last."[22] Vedder and the others who felt that literature should be uplifting, and Howells who saw "realism" as the prime goal of literature, were allied more closely than they realized in that both groups held as a central belief that literature must uphold a moral truth. Both reflected what Harry Hayden Clark describes as the New England "inherited concern for moral problems of character."[23] They simply chose different routes.

Two other important literary trends should be included when depicting the ambience in which Melville produced Billy Budd. Women were "the greatest part of the novel-reading public ,"[24] and therefore their taste and perceptions and opinions were crucial to the popular reception of a book, as Ann Douglas has analyzed in great detail.[25] Indeed, De Forest, according to Van Wyck Brooks, was a failure because he did not appeal to women. "Men had largely ceased to read, and De Forest was a man's writer."[26] Evidently, according to this theory, writers like Howells and Twain could be successful because they did not offend the fastidious taste of women. In their books women were

regarded highly, indeed, often idealistically and unrealistically. While realism was the dominant note in American literature in the period under discussion, in the portrayal of women it generally had not yet achieved a foothold. Until about 1893 with Stephen Crane's Maggie, women in America represented moral authority and while realism and moral truth often went hand in hand, in the portrayal of women in literature, moral uplift still held the public imagination.

In the eighties and nineties, Utopias became increasingly popular, giving credence to D. H. Lawrence's statement that the "two great American specialties [are] insisting on the plumbing [and] saving the world."[27] The basis of these American Utopias was an optimistic view of technical and theoretical progress which held that man could triumph if he only would make use of the technical and theoretical instruments developing all around him. The methods proposed by the Utopias were varied: monetary reform in The Great Awakening by Albert Merrill; the cooperative movement in The World a Department Store; the use of electricity as an agent of change in Looking Forward by H. W. Hillman; even the realistic Howells joined this movement with his A Traveller from Altruria, a fantasy which turned its back on realism. The most popular and influential of those books was, of course, Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward, which precipitated many socialist groups that sought

to undertake reform, but in many ways this Utopian movement was a return to past ideals where"right reason," Christian charity, and the proper use of industrialism could set things straight again. It exemplified faith in man's intrinsic goodness if he could only be shown the proper way; if he would only rip away the tawdry veneer that had camouflaged the basic goodness, then the American ideal could again be resurrected. Even though these ideas were new in many ways, relying on progress in science, industry, and economic theory, they also relied heavily on the old American faith in man's basic goodness while ignoring man's acquisitiveness and capacity for brutality and selfishness. The Utopian movement certainly meant to move society forward, but it was "inner-directed" by beliefs that looked backward.

The phenomenon of the eighties and nineties, therefore, could be described as a crumbling away of the American ideal that the New World offered something new and special in independent thinking and moral fervor; it had been replaced by a zeal for monetary success. But integral to this trend was the moral response to it - if America was losing its halo there were those who were pointing it out. There were some who ignored the corruption and the reformers and somewhat blindly held on to the America Dream as a reality; they refused to believe that it had been stripped bare. Amazingly enough, there was a third aspect to the

eighties and nineties, the evidently immortal American Dream that somehow maintained its vitality despite all the forces that were gnawing away at it.

In 1880, Henry Adams's novel Democracy reflected disillusion at the corruption of government, a government that was increasingly showing itself to be inadequate against the pulls and pressures of private interests seeking wealth and power. In effect, it further developed the ideas set out earlier by Twain in The Gilded Age. The protagonist in Democracy rejects marriage with Senator Ratcliffe when she discovers him to be corrupt, but she bitterly notes at the end of the novel that most Americans would say her decision was wrong, too fastidious. A review in The Nation regarded the presentation of the senator as the probable Republican candidate for president as a "perversion."[28] While the reviewer did not deny corruption, he bristled a bit at the suggestion that it could reach so high. Adams's disillusion at what was happening to America came to fruition many years later in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres in which Adams sees salvation in feelings, emotions - in the heart. If America had lost its heart, his response was to seek it elsewhere.

But the review of Democracy failed to deal with, or was blind to, Adams's basic disgust at "good-natured mediocrity, sanctioned by the popular will and awesome in its indifference to the idea of self doubt," as described by Irving Howe. Howe calls attention to the "uniquely American

complacence - the aptitude of the democratic mind for self-congratulation."[29] Melville, evidently responding to the commercial hopefulness of the times, expressed similar views in a letter in 1885 in which he declared himself neither a pessimist nor an optimist, but needing a "counterpoise to the exorbitant hopefulness, juvenile and shallow, that makes such a bluster these days."[30] Many men in the literary world, such as the reviewer of Henry Adams's novel, had yet to relinguish their belief in American moral superiority and would be quick to criticize those who had already taken the step.

Henry James's response to America's changing scene was to delve deeper into the motivation and psychology of the individual while allowing the political and social setting to assume a lesser role. Portrait of a Lady, published in 1881, while touching on the "purity" of American ideas as compared to European, really has as its center of interest the characters of the novel and their internal stresses and strains. In a review of the book in The New York Times dated November 27, 1881, the critic notes Ralph's goodness and Isabel's charm; Isabel is to be admired in that her "aspirations are high and pure." In describing the tone of the novel as "elevated,"[31] the reviewer has sought out the "elevating" moments in the novel while avoiding the complexities and torments. The Harper review noted that Isabel remained unchanged throughout, despite her brush with brutal

reality. Throughout, according to the review, she preserved "her cherished illusions and her distinctive and winsome individuality."[32] How different from current estimates. The contemporary reviewers refused to deal with the effect of moral corruption on a heroine who was so appealingly American in her "high and pure" aspirations.

In 1882, William Dean Howells's A Modern Instance was greeted with mixed reviews. Its realism was derided: "It is a dull imagination which needs all the detail which Mr. Howells has given of cheap boarding houses and restaurants."[33] The reviewer in The Atlantic Monthly continues by complaining of a literature which "employs so fine a pencil upon that which is ignoble." However, the book's involvement in the "ignoble" does not prevent the reviewer from elevating it into a moral drama with devil and angel vying for an innocent soul, in effect, a morality play. Marcia's passion, or jealousy, is compared to Othello's in that it too is kindled by an evil contact, in her case Bartley Hubbard. Marcia is like Othello, we are told, because the "nobility of undeveloped nature succumbed to the savage within." Bartley is described as a Iago, characterized by the "disease of civilization . . . the type of an over-refined and conscienceless civilization." Marcia is weak because she is the "product of a life where religion has run to seed, and men and women are living by traditions which have faded into a copybook morality." Ben Halleck, the "angel" in the struggle,

was awarded the laurels in the battle for Marcia's soul, but the book fails, according to the reviewer, because it lacks the "joyousness of hope."[34]

The reviewer in The New York Times was more astute, although again we see the novel described in terms of a morality play, but this time country and city are the metaphors for the confrontation of good and evil. The review ends by sounding a moral note.

> Its morality is of the highest grade and not too much forced. Somehow one is the better for having read it for if one is safe against the grosser crimes of Bartley, who can say he or she is not likely to commit the follies and weaknesses of Marcia and her husband.[35]

If Billy Budd had received contemporary notices by either reviewer they would have undoubtedly viewed Billy as an angel and Claggart as a devil, but would Captain Vere have been Marcia's equivalent, the object of the struggling forces? It could be said that Vere, like Marcia, was weak in that he lived by "traditions which have faded into copy-book morality." But in Billy Budd, who is the victor in the struggle for Vere's soul? From The Atlantic and The New York Times reviews, it seems apparent that victory or defeat would have to be assigned, that neither reviewer would have been satisfied to claim for Vere moral ambiguity. They, like Henry Vedder in 1894, evidently felt that any book that expressed the complexity of morality and of the

decisions it mandates is "vicious."[36] This view is further corroborated by a later article in The Atlantic of October 1885 in which A Modern Instance is deemed offensive because of the lack of "distinction between the little and the great in misdemeanor . . . . If we are to have a portraiture of moral baseness, we have a right to ask for some shadows so deep as to leave no doubt of their meaning."[37]

Moral ambiguity was evidently both unacceptable and reprehensible to these critics. Henry Vedder was not a voice crying in the wilderness when he stated unequivocally that "the eternal distinction between good and evil, between virtue and vice, cannot be obscured by dilettante theories of art."[38] The twentieth century is comfortable with moral ambiguity, an ambiguity that has become as much a fact of fiction as a fact of life in our century. But Billy Budd was written in the nineteenth century and contemporary viewers would have probably assigned Captain Vere a moral value; if Melville's evaluation was not clear to them, Billy Budd would have probably been sharply criticized on these grounds.

Huckleberry Finn was published in 1885. Parrington described it as a "triumph over the sacred tribal law of conformity - the assertion of the individual will in opposition to society - and it reveals the heart of Mark Twain's philosophy."[39] In a contemporary review, Huckleberry Finn was applauded for his "undying fertility of invention,

his courage, his manliness in every trial" as an "incarnation of the better side of the ruffianism that is one result of the independence of Americans, just as hypocrisy is one result of the English respect for civilization."[40] The popularity of this book, in which a young boy responds to the intrinsic goodness of his heart and in so doing courageously takes on society and its mean reliance on conformist behavior, illustrates that while American ideals were losing ground in the 1880's, a countervailing voice of moral protest was strong and widespread. How would this same public have regarded the argument of Captain Vere who asserted the proper domination of the heart by the stricture of "forms, measured forms"? Popular and critical response found Huckleberry innocent when he knowingly broke the law to free a slave; how would it have found for Captain Vere who followed the law and knowingly killed an innocent boy?

In 1886 The New York Times could find nothing of value in Henry James's The Bostonians and dismissed it with annoyance as being too long and too uninteresting.[41] The reviewer in The Atlantic was generally "repelled" by all the characters, except for Miss Birdseye, because they are pushed "too near the brink of nature" by Henry James. The reviewer remarks that the exposure of Miss Chancellor's mind is "almost indecent."[42] Neither reviewer dealt with what is evidently one of the central concerns of the novel -

to satirize the reformers of New England and thus call attention to the "pretension of American society as a whole."[43] In addition, according to Howe, the novelist has enunciated the idea that "life in America has gone askew."[44] It was perhaps the fact that these concerns were dealt with in The Bostonians that made the reviewers uncomfortable. The lesbianism evidently troubled them too, but such concerns, overtly stated, could not be dealt with at that time. They could barely be imagined.

Periodicals such as The New York Times, The Atlantic Monthly, and The Nation, all of which commented on the James's novel, seemed peculiarly sensitive to what is special in being American. We are told that the American writer should stress the values of being American, should feel pride in America's cutting itself off from Europe and having the strength to stand unsupported by traditions that have no value in a democracy. This sensitivity to what is peculiarly American is invariably reflected in contemporary reviews of the books of the 1880's and 1890's. A Senator Ratcliffe in Democracy cannot become president of the United States because corruption sinks to the lowest common denominator; it does not rise to the top. Huckleberry Finn's spirit of individuality is special to America. Mark Twain is particularly American in Connecticut Yankee not so much because he exposes the sham in royalty, but more because he loves freedom. While Rudyard Kipling depicted England as

carrying the "white man's burden," it could be said with equal accuracy that America felt itself carrying the world's moral "burden."

In The Rise of Silas Lapham, published in 1887, William Dean Howells describes a situation in which a businessman has the opportunity to swindle a huge corporation and save himself from financial ruin; by so doing he will be legally free of any crime. Silas, realizing that although he could be legally right, he would be morally wrong, chooses morality over legality. The Atlantic reviewer characterized it as a "war which was waged within the conscience of the hero."[45] In Billy Budd, Captain Vere also wages an internal war, but the outcome is different. According to Vere, the law must be upheld even when it serves evil. It may be rightfully argued that the difference in choices manifests the difference between Howells's sunny outlook and Melville's dark vision. Silas's choice is Howells's demonstration that underneath the "commonness" of such men as Silas Lapham is the solid, sound human core shared by all men. The question here posed is how would Vere's decision have been greeted by an audience that applauded Silas Lapham's.

Howells's A Minister's Charge, published the same year, describes a situation similar to that of The Rise of Silas Lapham in that the "sturdy morals which underly the American rustic . . . enable him to rise above social and

financial disaster."[46] When confronted by a choice the minister, although aware that his mistake will be a disaster to himself, chooses what is morally right, not what conventions or traditions pretend is morally right.

It is interesting that the Howells who constantly manifested a disposition to believe in the superiority of the American ideals, who really believed in the intrinsic value of the common man - that even Howells in his later years began to change when overwhelmed by the obvious - the unscrupulous plotting of big business and the corruption of government. Honest Silas Lapham was replaced by more sinister figures such as Bryfoos in A Hazard of New Fortunes, Gerrish in Annie Kilburn, and Northwick in The Quality of Mercy. Van Wyck Brooks cites these examples as "one of many proofs that Howells's mind responded to every change in the mood of the nation."[47]

In his biography of Howells, Kenneth Lynn points out the battle going on within Howells's psyche over the contrast of outside events with his essential beliefs. About a year and a half before he rallied American writers "to concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life," because "American writers live in freedom," Howells had suffered a nervous breakdown as a "direct consequence of his sense of alienation from great issues of the day. According to Lynn, those phrases, which have served to diminish his stature in the twentieth century, were already "fighting

slogans of Howells's defiant but doomed effort in the late eighties and early nineties . . . to break free of his enveloping sense of isolation and irrelevancy."[48] By ignoring Howells's environment, critics have failed to fully understand or appreciate his meaning, a loss to both Howells and the reader. Some cognizance of the circumstances of the writer's personal life and the life of the surrounding society helps the critic to understand the work at hand.

Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court in 1889 is now viewed in retrospect as a response to a society in which "technology, rather than supporting democracy, was, through its monopolistic combination, destroying it."[49] Larzar Ziff and other modern critics point to the change within the novel from a rollicking satire to a demonstration of a technology that ends in destroying its opponents mercilessly. Contemporary assessment, however, viewed the book very differently, totally ignoring the brutal ending. One reviewer asserted that this book "makes us glad of our republic and our epoch,"[50] while another called it a book in which the "moral purpose shines."[51] The former went on to state that the episodes demonstrate that laws were still made that preserve "things, not men," and that is still the "ideal of legislation." Twain is critical of this kind of law; early in the book the hero explains the ideals held by America or, perhaps more accurately, the ideals the Americans like to think they live by.

> . . .'the country is the real thing . . . the eternal thing; institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged . . . to be loyal to rags, to shout for rags, to worship rags - that is loyalty to unreason . . . it belongs to monarchy, was invented by monarchy; let monarchy keep it.'[52]

The reviewers who admired Twain's Americanism would probably have considered Captain Vere guilty of "loyalty to unreason" as he points to loyalty to the "buttons" on his uniform rather than to Nature. Vere uses the law to destroy a man, reasoning that his object is to preserve the structure of things, demonstrating exactly what the reviewer criticizes so strongly, that laws preserve "things, not men."

Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage in 1895 was accorded instant critical acclaim. In a perceptive review in The New York Times, the book was commended for being "extraordinarily true . . . defying every accepted tradition of martial glory."[53] In the closing paragraph of the review, however, the influence of the times makes its presence felt. The writer claims unequivocally that Private Henry Fleming "has been transformed . . . he has saved his colors and he has sounded his own depths."[54] There is no awareness of any ambiguity in the ending, nor of a possible irony; Crane's point of view, evidently, is perfectly clear. In The Nation, the commentator is satisfied that Henry has come out "a hero again in the end."[55] The English review of Crane's novel could not have been more enthusiastic or

admiring; there is barely an adverse word, but again the review ends with the "moral" of the book, that "we may then infer that virtue easy in moments of distress may be useful also in everyday experiences."[56] The reviewer, George Wyndham, admires the realism of the presentation of war, the impressionistic techniques - all things we admire today - but he sees no irony, no questioning of basic values, as we do today. What would George Wyndham have told us of the "lesson" in Billy Budd? For the nineteenth-century reviewer, the conclusion of The Red Badge of Courage held no mysteries; it is the twentieth century reader who is uneasy at the end, questioning whether Stephen Crane is being ironic about the experience of war and its power to ennoble. When the late nineteenth century put morality under the glass, the reflection was clear; any blurring was quickly polished away.

The change in perception about Crane's book is understandable in historical terms, but how can any reasonable person explain the reception accorded Mark Twain's Joan of Arc in 1896? Contemporary reviews incredibly cite as the prime asset of the work the presentation of Joan in "living flesh,"[57] "clothed in flesh and blood."[58] Today Joan of Arc is criticized for exactly the reasons it was then praised; Joan is totally unreal, her shining goodness fatigues the modern sensibility by its relentless purity. Perhaps this work was greeted so favorably because, first, it was the

work of the most popular author in America and, second, because in the daily outpouring of evidence that profits were more to be admired than spirit, some reaffirmation of the values of an unselfish life was desperately needed.

The nineteenth-century need for moral clarity is again manifested in an article on Henry James's The Spoils of Poynton in 1897. In The New York Times, the reviewer is distressed at James's "evident" sympathy for Mrs. Garth despite occasional touches of irony, and he is further saddened to think that the reader will put the book down "with no definite idea in his mind of the identity of Mrs. Gareth."[59] Evidently the confusion lies in James's evocation of a sympathy tinged with irony. The question as to whether or not Mrs. Gareth burned her home to "save" her treasures from the Philistines is never resolved in the novel. What is Mrs. Gareth really about? How is she to be regarded? Although modern critical skepticism has ceased to ransack books for answers and, indeed, the seriousness of any book that proposes answers becomes highly suspect, the nineteenth century had not yet given up the desire for clearly stated moral standards.

With some sense, then, of the times in which Melville wrote his last work, and aware of how most contemporary reviewers perceived familiar works, we can now speculate on how Melville's Billy Budd might possibly have been received if it had been reviewed in its own time. In many ways it

differed greatly from the works we have been discussing and seems isolated from the literary ideas in vogue. In a time when realism was the battle cry of an important segment of the literary community, Melville chose to write a story that had many of the elements of a parable. In a time when Howells and others talked about delineating the ordinary concerns of common people, Melville wrote about an extraordinary event that cast the main participants in heroic molds. Set on a British warship it was, superficially at least, dissociated from any advocacy of those American ideals which were important to contemporary reviewers; nor did it end with a succinct moral lesson. Apparently isolated from the other serious works published in its day, Billy Budd was, nevertheless, not as alien as it appears at first.

Melville, after all, had always been responsive to the society in which he lived. Van Wyck Brooks explains, for example, that Melville, among other writers, was "alarmed at the growing division of classes and the spread of poverty along with the increase of wealth."[60] In Redburn Melville responded to the poverty in England with his powerful rendering of the hopeless situation of the poor in Liverpool; in The Tartarus of Maids he attacked the "horrors of the industrial system" in one of the paper-mills of the Berkshire region of the United States.[61] The focus of satiric attack in The Confidence Man is the all encompassing growth of avarice in America, a greed for money that

turned all men, with rare exceptions, into scoundrels or pawns. The events of the day passed through Melville as they do through all men, leaving traces and residues that influencee ideas and actions.

Melville was, as all must be, a man of his times; and Melville responded, as all men must, to his time. It is of some interest, therefore, that he set his last story in the historic past in foreign ships on foreign waters. The possible reasons for this choice make for some interesting commentary on the nature of Billy Budd. At the time that Melville was puzzling over Billy Budd, he was also involved in preparing the collection of John Marr poems, reminiscences of their youth by old sailors whose sailing days had long since past. Melville, now older and enfeebled, felt more kinship with the past than he felt with the present. His deliberate dissociation of Billy Budd from the present, however, may have been more a profound response to the present than a retreat. It may have expressed his opposition to a world swarming with plotting men, instead of the older world of feeling men.

Melville persisted in seeing the heroic possibilities in the common man. The poem Timoleon, published in 1891, is about a heroic man who proves his heroism by acting independently of tradition and responding courageously to inner, purer mandates. This concept of larger-than-life men, "exceptional men," had no place in the America of the

1880's and 1890's. According to Matthiessen, "Melville could feel that the deepest need for rapaciously individualistic America was a radical affirmation of the heart."[62]

Matthiessen also points out that at the time that Melville wrote his last sea story, John Jay Chapman was "protesting against the conservative legalistic dryness that characterized our educated class," and Henry Adams knew that the educated classes "tended too much towards the analytic mind, that it lacked juices."[63] The working out of Captain Vere's final decision in Billy Budd could have been Melville's dramatization of the "legalistic dryness" that permeated our civilized classes. In Captain Vere, a member of the "educated classes," Melville imagined a man who was totally dominated by a concept of "right and wrong" delineated by a legal structure rather than a moral one. The officers on his ship note a "streak of the pedantic running" through Captain Vere (p. 63). Joseph Schiffman reminds us that critics, in claiming that Melville accepts Vere's action as tragically necessary, "isolate Melville from the Gilded Age, the time in which Melville produced Billy Budd."[64] Instead of Melville's paradigm of acceptance, Captain Vere could have personified for Melville what can happen when the laws of society become increasingly separated from human feelings and strives, instead, to protect the system rather than the individual.

Billy Budd, in its concern with the growing split

between the intellect and feeling, in portraying man's growing dependence on the forms of morality rather than its essence, in its theme of loss of innocence, both personally and nationally, could be termed a work of the later part of the nineteenth century in America. Melville evidently believed "in the value of the American dream, but not in its victory."[65]

If Billy Budd had been published in its time it would have been criticized by Howells's school as being unrealistic, dealing with exceptional men and uncommon events. Those who admired the structure of Henry James's novels would have abhorred the digressions in Billy Budd and pronounced it aesthetically unacceptable. All the reviewers, the followers of Howells's realism and Vedder's moralism included, would have been critical of Herman Melville for becoming involved in non-American subjects with characters not typical of America. If any single idea is a constant in the book reviews of the 1880's and 1890's, it is that American writers have a particular destiny, an absolute mandate to turn their backs on European concerns and immerse themselves totally in America, promoting its peoples, ideals, and traditions. In Herbert Brown's analysis of the critical writings of the last part of the nineteenth century, he convincingly demonstrates that "the great American novel was, first of all, to be distinctively American," and all "avoidance of European background and character is praised."[66]

D. H. Lawrence was probably right when he declared that "somewhere deep in every American heart lies a rebellion against the old parenthood of Europe."[67]

The reviewers who held moral example to be a central concern of good literature, who constituted the majority, would probably have understood Melville to be critical of Vere for being subservient to society and thereby unjustly killing an innocent man. If anyone had sensed the ambiguity, as some of the reviewers of books of the 1880's and 1890's might have, Melville would have been judged guilty of muddying the moral waters. But according to the contemporary reviews discussed in this chapter, it seems probable that the readers would have seen Melville as being critical of Captain Vere, a man who did not think independently, who acted unjustly and who, therefore, was morally reprehensible. The critics who admired Silas Lapham, Huckleberry Finn, and the Connecticut Yankee for their independence from society's strictures and for their compassionate and feeling hearts, who admired these personifications of the American ideal of love of liberty and independent thinking, would probably have been extremely critical of Captain Vere for putting society above conscience, the law above love.

Then critics of the 1920's through the forties would have had to struggle hard, and perhaps hopelessly, to prove that Melville meant Vere's action to be regarded with sympathetic approval. The critics of the 1950's and 1960's

would not have been deemed so radical when they first appeared, and those writing about Billy Budd in the 1970's would be hard put to demonstrate that Melville had been deliberately ambiguous, because despite Melville's retreat into the past in his choice of time and setting, Billy Budd's concerns were very contemporary. It deals with moral problems and rather ordinary people, common sailors; but unlike Howells's conception of the common man (often placid and dull), Melville's vision is more acute in that he sees that "down among the groundlings, among the beggars and rakers of the garbage, profound passion is enacted (p. 78). Modern in its use of myth and in its structure, fragmented by continual digression, Billy Budd was nevertheless irrevocably attached to its own times. Granville Hicks describes Stephen Crane entering the literary world in the nineties as a "symbol of the writers of the nineties - talent that flares bravely and is cruelly extinguished; blind, bitter bows against dark evils; struggle and flight, suffering and death."[68] These words are descriptive of Melville's literary career as well, and although he was leaving the scene as Stephen Crane was making his entrance, in Billy Budd, Melville could have been the leader of the literary 1890's.

Notes

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[3] Ward, p. 13.

[4] Samuel Eliot Morison, Oxford History of the American People (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 761.

[5] Ibid., p. 737.

[6] Stanton Garner, "Melville in the Customhouse, 1881-1882: A Rustic Beauty Among the Highborn Dames of Court," Melville Society Extracts, No. 35 (1978), p. 12.

[7] Ibid., p. 14.

[8] Walcutt, Charles Child, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 12.

[9] Samuel Morison, Henry Steele Commanger, and William E. Leuchtenburg, The Growth of the American Republic (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), II, 170.

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[11] Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1958), III, xxvii.

[12] Walcutt, p. 14.

[13] Parrington, xxvii.

[14] Brooks, Melville and Whitman, p. 475.

[15] Larzar Ziff, The American 1890's: Life and Times of a Lost Generation (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 15.

[16] Parrington, 238.

[17] Ziff, p. 85.

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[19] Rev. of Americans Writers of To-day by Henry C. Vedder, Dial, Feb. 1895, p. 88.

[20] Ziff, p. 64.

[21] Charles Dudley Warner, "Modern Fiction," Atlantic Monthly, April 1883, p. 466.

[22] Herbert Brown, "The Great American Novel," The Critic, April 1885, p. 3.

[23] Robert Falk, "The Rise of Realism: 1871-1891," in American Literary History, ed. Harry Hayden Clark (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1967), p. 393.

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[27] D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. vii.

[28] Rev. of Democracy by Henry Adams, The Nation, 22 April 1880, p. 312.

[29] Howe, p. 175.

[30] Leyda, II, 288-89.

[31] Rev. of Portrait of a Lady by Henry James, New York Times, 27 Nov. 1881, p. 5, col. 3.

[32] Rev. of Portrait of a Lady by Henry James, Harper's Magazine, February 1882, p. 474.

[33] Rev. of A Modern Instance by William Dean Howells, Atlantic Monthly, Nov. 1882, p. 710.

[34] Ibid., p. 711.

[35] Rev. of A Modern Instance By William Dean Howells, New York Times, 15 Oct. 1881, p. 6., col. 3.

[36] Vedder, p. 82.

[37] Comments on A Modern Instance by William Dean Howells in a rev. of The Rise of Silas Lapham by William Dean Howells, Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1885, p. 555.

[38] Vedder, p. 82.

[39] Parrington, p. 95.

[40] Rev. of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain, Century, May 1885, p. 171.

[41] Rev. of The Bostonians by Henry James, New York Times, 28 March 1886, p. 12, col. 1.

[42] Rev. of The Bostonians by Henry James, Atlantic Monthly, June 1886, p. 850.

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[44] Ibid., p. 190.

[45] Rev. of The Rise of Silas Lapham by William Dean Howells, Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1885, p. 555.

[46] Ziff, p. 34.

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[49] Ziff, p. 69.

[50] Rev. of A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court by Mark Twain, Harper's Magazine, Jan. 1890, p. 320.

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[52] Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), pp. 81-2.

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[54] Ibid.

[55] Rev. of Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane, The Nation, 2 July 1896, p. 15.

[56] George Wyndham, "A Remarkable Book," rev. of Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane, New Review, Jan. 1896, p. 40.

[57] Rev. of Joan of Arc by Mark Twain, The Nation, 16 July 1896, p. 53.

[58] Rev. of Joan of Arc by Mark Twain, Harper's Magazine, June 1896, p. 163.

[60] Brooks, Melville and Whitman, p. 467.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Matthiessen, p. 513.

[63] Ibid., p. 514.

[64] Schiffman, p. 130.

[65] Frederic I. Carpenter, American Literature and the Dream (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1955), p. 74.

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Chapter IV

Harbingers of Billy Budd

There is an inherent paradox in studying the last work of a great writer. Before taking a step forward, we must take a number of steps backward; to master the end, we must probe the beginnings. Just as there is a direct relationship between our understanding of a person and our understanding of his past, where he comes from, his history, and his connections, this truism must extend to works of art. Melville's past - personal and professional - formed Billy Budd. It is revealed sometimes as vestiges, sometimes in bits and pieces, sometimes as a retelling of actual events. There is, after all, no imagination without some memory to draw on. Melville was aware of this apparent paradox. Writing about the conception of a truly original character in The Confidence Man, Melville admitted that nothing "can be born in the author's imagination - it being true in literature as in zoology that all life is from the egg" (p. 271).

To uncover clues to the meaning of Billy Budd, as well as to resolve some of the problems, we must start with Typee, Melville's first novel and his greatest success, published when he was twenty-seven years old. Although from Typee to Billy Budd a journey of almost fifty years must be made, as Albert Camus comments, Melville "never wrote anything but the

same book, which he began again and again." He claims that Melville began with the "story of a voyage, inspired first of all solely by the joyful curiousity of youth," and that quest continued to his last work, Billy Budd, a voyage again, but this time "inhabited by an increasingly wild and burning anguish."[1] But this is only partly true; Typee varies greatly from Omoo although the setting of both is the same, and there do seem to be vast differences between his initial works and the experimental Mardi which begins with a sea adventure and ends in allegory and satire. After Moby-Dick we sit down to that sumptuous feast for psychoanalysts, Pierre, then go on to the satire which is just beginning to be appreciated, The Confidence Man, continue through the great body of poetry, and eventually we are led to an unclear finish in the problematic Billy Budd. There are vast differences in spirit, tone, structure, and meaning among all these works, but, not surprisingly, each work is irrevocably tied to the previous ones. Although Billy Budd was written at the end of Melville's life, the genesis of many of its central concerns and the attitudes towards these concerns can be traced through almost all of Melville's previous works. Indeed, William Shurr claims that Billy Budd "is not only the confirmation but the synthesis of the life's work that preceded it."[2] An examination of these works as precursors of Billy Budd is a step towards resolving some of the problems previously discussed.

Typee is autobiographical, describing a sea journey taken by Melville because of financial need, not because of youthful curiosity, as Camus suggests. His father, Allan, had died a bankrupt in 1832 when Herman was only thirteen years old, and the resultant financial stress necessitated having young Herman and his older brother, Gansevoort, withdrawn from the Albany Academy three months later; Herman became a clerk and his brother unsuccessfully attempted to put together the pieces of their father's business at the age of sixteen. Neither boy succeeded. Herman went from work as a clerk to teaching, and eventually to sea in an attempt to ease his mother's financial burdens. In 1839 he sailed on the St. Lawrence, a merchant ship, for Liverpool, and in 1841 he went back to sea on the whaler Acushnet, returning on the frigate United States in the fall of 1844. The experiences on these ships were to become a bottomless reservoir into which Melville dipped from the beginning of his literary career to its end.

Although Typee is suffused with the "joyful curiosity of youth," many of the serious themes that will dominate Melville's mind are already woven into the texture. The plot tells of the adventures of two sailors who jump ship, live among cannibals, and escape to tell the tale. These exciting and actual suspenseful adventures among the cannibals are enriched by a serious theme which becomes a steadily insistent note throughout the novel - the theme of civilization versus nature.

The cannibals and their society are contrasted to the more cannibalistic "civilized" man. Melville remarks, "civilization, for every advantage she imparts, holds a hundred evils in reserve - the heart burning, the jealousies, the social rivalries."[3] One of the evils of civilization is the brutality of war made even more horrendous by civilization's "death-dealing engines" which "far exceed in the amount of misery they cause the crimes which we regard with such abhorrence in our less enlightened fellow creatures."[4] This point of view will remian essentially unimpaired throughout Melville's growth as an artist and as a thinker; if there is any change noted at all, it is in the direction of a hardening of this belief.

In 1870, twenty-four years later, Melville underscored in his copy of Balzac's Eugenie Grandet,

> He had received the horrible education of that society, where, in a single evening, are committed in thought and in words, more crimes than the law punishes at the Court of Assizes; where a jest or a sneer annihilates the grandest conceptions; where a man is deemed strong only as he sees clearly; and to see clearly there is to believe in nothing, neither in feelings, nor in men, nor even in events; for they concoct false events.

Melville bitterly comments in the margin: "This describes man in his consummate flower of civilization."[5] When Melville reaches Billy Budd in the late 1880's, "civilized" man will be depraved and evil, and those responding to their spontaneous feelings, to their "natures," will be worthy of love.

Billy Budd will be the supreme idea of man untouched by the evils of civilization, while Claggart, the "civilized" man, will be compelled to exterminate that which is good and beautiful. Captain Vere will argue for Billy's death by claiming that civilization must subdue nature for the good of society, and the death of pure goodness will become a necessity mandated by martial law, a prime tool of society to repress man's nature. War and civilization prove companionable bedfellows, and nature is vanquished.

Even in Typee, his first novel, with its mood of romance and exciting adventure, written when the author was only twenty-seven years old, Melville was aware of the "darkness and sorrow that underlie light and joy."[6] As his life progressed, the underlying "darkness and sorrow" would almost totally obliterate the weaker lights of joy.

Omoo, like Typee a popular and critical success, was published the following year. The setting was the same, but the tone was more jovial and its concerns more trivial. It is the adventure of a young sailor and a ship's doctor who lead a crew in refusing to return to a whaling ship. Their brief imprisonment and exile in Tahiti and other islands is humorously recounted. While there are references to those gifts of civilization, missionaries and syphilis, contrasted with the generosity and goodness of the natives, the theme of society and civilization is not as seriously nor as interestingly pursued as it is in Typee.

Although Mardi, like Typee and Omoo, begins with a sea adventure, the interest of the book is centered on ideas rather than incidents. Elements of social commentary, political satire, philosophy, adventure, and romance vie with one another for dominance and, at different points in the book, each element achieves momentary ascendency. The first part of the book, the sea adventure, is hopelessly separated from the main part of the novel, which is steeped in ideas, but some unity is achieved in Mardi through the theme of the hero's search for his lost love, Yillah. The search takes Taji from island to island where different governments, social systems, and values are observed and discussed by Taji and his companions. But the philosophizing so overwhelms the novel that the search for Yillah is often forgotten; the novel loses its fictional mode and becomes a treatise.

Two themes are devloped in this book that are so important to Melville that they will be restated and reexamined in Billy Budd forty-two years later. Perhaps the most significant thematic tie of Billy Budd to Mardi is the latter's concern with mankind's eternal dilemma of justifying a bad means to achieve a good end. The hero of Mardi meets the elusive Yillah while she is accompanied by an old priest and his sons; they are taking her to an island where she is to be sacrificed to the gods. In order to free the girl, Taji kills the old man and they escape with the sons in pursuit. The sons of the murdered priest are to appear and reappear in the

book as furies determined to avenge their father's death. The killing of the old priest is in itself ambiguous.

> Remorse smote me hard; and like lightning I asked myself whether the death-deed I had done was sprung from a virtuous motive, the rescuing of a captive from thrall; or whether beneath that pretence, I had engaged in this fatal affray for some other, and selfish purpose; the companionship of a beautiful maid (p. 157).

As the book gains in momentum, Taji's guilt seems to loom larger and larger until he is totally overwhelmed and doomed by the act of murder.

Similarly, in Billy Budd the controlling moral dilemma is an act of "legal murder" supposedly intended to maintain a greater good - social order and the prevention of chaos. Captain Vere argues that an innocent man must be hanged so that law and order will be preserved. As in the case of Taji, Melville never makes it quite clear whether or not he approves the act, or whether he finds it morally justifiable, but Captain Vere is doomed by his act just as Taji is doomed by his. Unlike Hawthorne, who seems to be essentially interested in the effects of guilt on the psyche, Melville irrevocably locks the act to the guilt it produces.

Melville's spokesman in Mardi is Babbalanja, a minister of the king and a companion in the search for Yillah, who often serves as commentator and critic. At the end of the book Babbalanja discusses a famous writer in the civilization of Mardi, commending this writer because as he keeps writing

he gets "deeper and deeper into himself" (p. 493). Admiration of this quality, noted by Melville's surrogate, is a constant throughout Melville's life and career. The diver is the metaphor that arises in Melville's most impassioned writing. In Moby-Dick the whale is the earthly creature who can dive the deepest, apparently the embodiment of all knowledge because he is unafraid to explore the depths, to search out what is lurking beneath the waves; it is the nature of the whale. Ahab is like Moby-Dick and becomes a diver pursuing a diver, in that he hunts the whale to confront a kind of truth, to discover what hides "behind the mask." The Try-Works" chapter of Moby-Dick ends dramatically with Ishmael thinking disparagingly of those who "would rather talk of operas than hell," who deny "the dark side of this earth . . . which is two-thirds of this earth." The man who risks diving is like the Catskill eagle

> that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.[7]

Like Ahab destroying everything in his relentless pursuit of an ideal, Pierre substitutes writing for whaling in plumbing his inner self; despite his fear of psychic destruction, he does not alter his direction. Melville's awareness of the danger of pursuing unknown depths makes his admira-

tion for those who dare even greater. In 1849 he wrote: "This going mad of a friend . . . comes straight home to every man who feels his soul in him . . . he who has never felt, momentarily, what madness is has but a mouthful of brains."[8] Later that same year he underscored in Goethe's Autobiography, "When one enters once into the world, and gives way to it, it is necessary to be very cautious, lest one should be carried away, not to say driven mad by it."[9] Pierre and Ahab, both driven and destroyed by inner fires, drag down with them the bodies of many loved ones. Despite the havoc they bring, Ahab and Pierre are admired by Melville, who once wrote in a letter, "I love all men who dive . . . any fish can swim near the surface."[10] They are presented as men of tragic dimension, heroic figures worthy of wonder.

Melville's love of the man who dives cannot be overlooked when the character and actions of Captain Vere are being evaluated. Vere deliberately refuses to look beyond his actions to their ultimate meaning. When a member of the court inquires as to Claggart's possible motivation in accusing Billy Budd, Vere skirts this crucial issue by saying it is a "matter for psychologic theologians" or a "jury of casuists . . . or moralists." Captain Vere agrees that "there is a mystery . . . a mystery of iniquity," but he quickly denies its import by questioning, "But what has a military court to do with it?" (p. 108). Instead of striking "behind the mask," he prudently masks himself behind the protective shield of military law and

forms so that he does not have to explore the horrors of of the unknown. Melville's love of the diver never altered; we must take this into account when we search for his meaning in Billy Budd.

After the failure of Mardi, Redburn His First Voyage enabled Melville to warm himself momentarily in the smiles of the public and the critics. Generally well accepted, but never achieving the literary acclaim of Typee or Omoo, Redburn uses as its fictional base Melville's first voyage as a sailor. The subtitle describes Melville as he first set out to sea: Being the Sailor Boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman in the Merchant Service. Melville was the "son-of-a-gentleman" in that his family had a distinguished history. His paternal grandfather had been a famous general in the Revolutionary War and the Gansevoorts, his mother's family, were wealthy and influential.

Just as Mardi splinters into two parts, a sea adventure and a surrealistic quest, Redburn also divides, but this time the split is limited to tone and theme rather than the totality of the book; as Redburn progresses, its concerns become bleaker as does its estimate of mankind. The young sailor's initiation into experience and "the ways of the world" begins on a ship, descends into the squalor of Liverpool, and ends on the return voyage with death as a constant companion. In Redburn, Melville, like the fictional Lombardo in Mardi, evidently "wrote right on, and so doing got deeper and deeper into himself." Similarly, Billy Budd became thicker in

meaning as it churned through five years of revisions, like Moby-Dick, fostering the speculation that Melville wrote in a developmental manner, enriching and sometimes changing as he dived deeper and deeper into the substance of his thoughts. Matthiessen notes this when he suggests that "some of Melville's most memorable passages are those in which you feel that you are sharing in the very process of his developing conciousness."[11]

The first one hundred or so pages of Redburn are essentially light in tone, with many burlesque touches such as the confrontation of the novice at sea with the jargon and slang of experienced seaman which almost becomes a vaudeville routine. Although there is occasional irony in this portion of the novel, it is usually good-natured; moments of pathos regarding Redburn's homesickness and unjust treatment at the hands of the personnel on board ship are passed over without undue sentimentality.

As the theme and tone of Redburn darken, characters appear who will be regenerated in Billy Budd, characters that will be focused more sharply and further complicated. Just as Billy Budd trusted Captain Vere to be his protector, Redburn initiallly puts his complete faith in the captain of his ship, convinced that he will act the role of a kind and protective father. Redburn learns, quickly and painfully, that Captain Riga is not the man he pretended to be when the young sailor was first accepted as a member of the crew.

> Indeed, I had made no doubt that he would in some special manner take me under his protection, and prove a kind friend and benefactor to me; as I had heard that some sea-captains are fathers to their crews; and so they are; but such fathers as Solomon's precepts tend to make severe and chastising fathers, fathers whose sense of duty overcomes the sense of love, and who everyday, in some sort, play the part of Brutus, who ordered his son away to execution, as I have read in our old family Plutarch.[12]

These lines, to readers of Billy Budd, could portray Captain Vere as accurately as they portray Captain Riga in Redburn. Captain Vere, a fatherly figure towards Budd, allows his "sense of duty" to overcome his "sense of Love" and orders Billy "away to execution." Billy confided his trust in Vere and died; Redburn survived the folly of his confidence in Riga, but he remained with deep scars from the brutal experience. There are different kinds of dying.

Later in Redburn Melville, in discussing Captain Riga and the power of captains generally, asserts that "at sea no appeal lies beyond the captain, he too often makes unscupulous use of his power. And as for going to law with him at the end of the voyage, you might as well go to law with the czar of Russia" (p. 340). In his last prose work, Billy Budd, the actions of Captain Vere in maintaining secrecy in the trial of the young sailor are seen as having "some resemblance to the policy adopted in those tragedies of the palace which have occurred more than once in the capital founded by Peter the Barbarian" (p. 103). Although many critics insist that Billy Budd demonstrates the notion that Melville changed in

his attitudes as he matured and declined, his continued interest in the figure of the captain as a tyrant, and in his recurrent use of metaphors such as the Russian ruler for the epitome of evil (both in 1849 and 1891), demonstrate that Melville, in these respects at least, had not changed one bit.

Redburn's Jackson prefigures the Claggart of Billy Budd. He is described as "full of hatred and gall against everything and everybody in the world; as if all the world was one person, and had done him some dreadful harm, that was rankling and festering in his heart. Sometimes I thought he was really crazy" (p. 78). Jackson, "corrupting and searing every heart that beat near him" (p. 134), like Claggart seeks to destroy a person of beauty and innocence, the visual reminder of his own inadequacies. Just as Claggart is first aroused to his feelings against Billy by "his significant personal beauty (p. 77), Redburn's "great strength and fine person, and particularly . . . his red cheeks" (p. 74), excites in Jackson the same hatred that Billy Budd provokes in Claggart.

There are two important differences between the malignity of Jackson and that of Claggart that attest to Melville's intensifying preoccupation with the overriding presence of evil in the universe. "There seemed even more woe than wickedness about [Jackson]; and his wickedness seeemed to spring from his woe; and for all his hideousness, there was that in his eye at times, that was ineffably pitiable and touching . . . I have pitied no man as I have pitied him" (p. 134). Melville

is suggesting mitigating circumstances as an explanation for Jackson's wickedness. The description ends with the sentiment of pity, hinting that in Redburn Melville was not yet ready to admit to the possibility that evil was innate and total in some men. By the time he arrived at Billy Budd he had no such reluctance. Of Claggart, briefly called the "man of sorrows," it is suggested that he could have loved Billy if not for "fate and ban," but little is made of these intriguing modifications. Claggart is inwardly evil; there is no real suggestion of an outside cause. He is a "depravity according to nature."

Another important difference in the two malign characters is that Jackson is often almost comic, snarling, jumping and hopping like a villain in a morality play. Claggart, in contrast, hides his irrational hatred behind a rational demeanor; he is quiet and deeply frightening.

In White Jacket or the World in a Man-of-War published the following year, 1850, Jackson's successor and another of Claggart's predecessors appears in the form of Bland. Like Claggart, Bland is the master-at-arms whom Melville describes as a "sort of high constable and school master," universally hated because of his "universal duty of a universal informer and hunter-up of delinquents."[13] The initial introduction of Bland is somewhat playful: "on the berth-deck he reigns supreme; spying out all greasespots made by the various cooks of the seaman's messes" (p. 26). (Interestingly enough,

Claggart and Budd's first encounter is over a spilled portion of soup.) But as White Jacket progresses and deepens, Bland's evil approximates Claggart's in unmotivated malignity, as "an organic and irreclaimable soundrel, who did wicked deeds as the legitimate operation of his whole internal organization. Phrenologically, he was without a soul" (p. 188). Unlike Jackson in Redburn, Bland is given no suggestion of formative circumstances that might have caused his cruelty. Like Claggart, he is innately evil, but he lacks Claggart's quiet cunning and clever methods of manipulation. From 1850 to 1886, the year Melville began Billy Budd, there was evidently enough time and experience for Melville to be convinced that iniquity was native to the universe.

Just as Captain Riga in Redburn had elements of Billy Budd's Captain Vere, so in Captain Claret of White Jacket did Melville begin to develop the more subtle and distinct characteristics of that same Captain Vere. Captain Claret, "while carefully shunning positive excesses, continually kept himself in an uncertain equilibrio between soberness and its reverse; which equilibrio might be destroyed by the first sharp vicissitude of events" (p. 111). Melville further claims that men like Captain Claret, like all potentates, should be closely observed because despite their outwardly kind manner, "if occasion come, will prove your uttermost tyrant" (p. 276). Similarly, Captain Vere appeared to be a kind man, sober and rational, but his demeanor was "destroyed by the first sharp

vicissitude of events." The accidental killing of Claggart by Billy Budd so agitated Vere that the ship's surgeon doubted his captain's sanity. Vere became tyrannical in his use of the drumhead court to try Budd; he forced the officers of the court to vote as he demanded, using subtle strategems that were more effective than blunt dictatorial maneuvers. Like Captain Claret, Vere maintained himself in "an uncertain equilibrio between soberness and its reverse," but when this equilibrio was upset, he became an "uttermost tyrant." Although thirty-six years separated the publication of White Jacket and the beginning of Billy Budd, Melville's attitude toward tyrannical authority remained intact. If not for the important touches of aristocratic background and intellectual leanings, Captain Vere, in his attitude and behavior, could be Captain Claret. If Melville abhorred men like Claret, which he unquestionably did, why would he admire Vere?

Melville did not believe that the role of captain, or of leader, was intrinsically evil. In White Jacket Melville extols the virtue of figures such as Nelson and Wellington, crediting these military heroes with a proper inner balance: "one large brain and one large heart have virtue sufficient to magnetise a whole fleet or any army" (p. 112). In the trial of Billy Budd, Vere deliberately upsets this essential balance, warning the court that they must not let "warm hearts betray heads that should be cool . . . the heart . . . hard though it be, she must here be ruled out" (p. 111).

The conflict of heart versus had mentioned in White Jacket in connection with Nelson and Wellington, becomes a central concern in Billy Budd.

Other fragments of White Jacket coalesce into solid substance in Billy Budd. The Somers affair, so important in the development of Billy Budd, is discussed in White Jacket in relation to the Articles of War that so horrify Melville.

> The well-known case of a United States brig furnished a memorable example, which at any moment may be repeated. Three men, in a time of peace, were then hung at the yard-arm, merely because, in the captain's judgment, it became necessary to hang them. To this day the question of their complete guilt is socially discussed (p. 303).

Melville refers to the Articles of War as "bloodthirsty laws" that were practiced in peacetime on the Somers. The conflict between the law of God (or Nature) and the laws of man (the Articles of War) becomes an emotional issue in White Jacket and a pivotal philosophical and moral issue in Billy Budd. In White Jacket Melville quotes from the jurist Blackstone saying, "'There is a law, coeval with mankind, dictated by God himself, superior in obligation to any other, and no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this,' that law is the Law of Nature . . ." (p. 145). In Billy Budd this conflict is broadened in scope in that it is no longer merely a question of the supremacy of the Articles of War over the laws of God, but whether the laws, conventions, and forms of men are to be subordinated when in conflict with the laws of Nature

(or God). Captain Vere argues before the drumhead court, stating that the court must not be moved by "Nature" because they have sworn allegiance to the King, not to Nature. Man's law, according to Vere, is superior to natural law and must prevail.

This moral dilemma appears again along with a problem that evokes intense fear and loathing in Melville in White Jacket - his concern with the practice of flogging on warships as punishment even for minor offences. Melville's rhetoric changes when he focuses on this topic; the book moves from fiction to a propagandistic diatribe against this practice. Evidently Melville is so horrified at this moral outrage that he shifts from the psychic distance appropriate to fiction, to a tone of personal outrage. Although this change in tone detracts from the novel's unity, it is very useful to us in our tracing the development of Melville's thinking. In White Jacket he asserts that flogging is a "religiously, morally, and immutable wrong . . . . It is not a dollar-and-cent question of expediency; it is a matter of right and wrong" (p. 146). Repugnance at the idea of flogging never diminished for Melville. Billy Budd is so embrued with a fear of being flogged that he works very conscientiously on board the ship to avoid such punishment. "This heightened alacrity had its cause . . . the impression made upon him by the first formal gangway-punishment he had ever witnessed" (p. 68). Melville, separated by so many years from this experience, is

able to relate it vividly through Billy.

> When Billy saw the culprit's naked back under the scourge, gridironed with red welts and worse, when he marked the dire expression in the liberated man's face as with his woolen shirt flung over him by the executioner he rushed forward from the spot . . . . Billy was horrified (p. 68).

Melville is still horrified. Time has not diminished his moral outrage.

In dealing with the question of flogging in White Jacket, Melville asserts that there are some problems that are so crucial that they cannot be skirted and must be confronted; these are problems of morality. They cannot be avoided, or diluted, or disguised by jargon. In White Jacket expediency is not justified when it serves an immoral purpose. The words of Captain Vere in Billy Budd assert exactly the opposite. Vere states that private conscience should yield to "that imperial one" under which they serve, that the inner knowledge of right and wrong contained in the "private conscience" should be ignored in favor of the dictates of man's law. When this argument fails to move the court he then raises the question of "expediency," warning that if they do not vote to have Budd hanged, mutiny may break out among the ship's crew. The matter of "right and wrong" is deliberately superseded by the "question of expediency."

Did Melville so change his values that he means us to applaud Vere's morality? The last three chapters of Billy Budd deal with how man can know the truth, how man knows what is

"right" and what is "wrong." The sequence begins with the line, "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. 128). Recounted first in this sequence is Captain Vere's dying with Billy's name murmured just before the moment of death. The next chapter quotes the distorted naval chronicle, and the last chapter ends with Billy's emergence as a myth and with the ballad "Billy in the Darbies." Many critics have interpreted this sequence to mean that truth is not knowable, that for Vere and for Melville, the problem is "how to act honorably given the tragic limitation of human knowledge."[14] Other critics claim that Melville deliberately structured the story as he did so that we would "conclude that form in either art or law is inadequate as a means of getting at the truth."[15] Mitchell points to the "direct opposite between legality and morality, or appearance and reality," in Billy Budd,[16] while Garner claims that Melville wrote "anti-history" as a conscious disavowal of the literalists who dedicate themselves to actual men and events."[17]

But perhaps the lines that begin "truth uncompromisingly told . . ." should be interpreted to mean that it is difficult to know what is true, rather than as an assertion that truth is not knowable. Melville, like all intelligent and thinking people, recognized the difficulty of knowing what is right and what is wrong; what is true and what is false. It

does not necessarily follow, however, for Melville or for ourselves, that because something worthwhile is difficult, or perhaps ultimately impossible, to achieve its pursuit should be abandoned. The Melville canon demonstrates that Melville always loved the diver, the dreamer of hopeless dreams, the pursuer of impossible goals. He knew their despair, but admired their courage. How could Melville have lauded such men, and then have us be content with Captain Vere?

Moby Dick seems, by virtue of its greatness, to sweep away any connection between itself and all of Melville's other works; it is unique in structure, imagery, rhetoric, and characterization. Moby-Dick is nevertheless, intimately related to all of Melville's works, before and after. The themes that connect Moby-Dick to the Melville canon have been amply discussed elsewhere; it is the thematic elements that emerge later in Billy Budd that are our concern in this study. It becomes increasingly apparent as Moby-Dick proceeds that one of Melville's central concerns is the conflict within each man between his intellect and his feelings, his head and his heart. The year Melville wrote Moby-Dick, he expressed the intensity with which he regards this perennial struggle in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne.

> I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart than Jupiter Olympus with his head. The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they

> rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch.[18]

Ahab, although a grand and impassioned figure, is unbalanced as a man because he has cast out his heart; he has repudiated his feelings. Ahab, in the chapter entitled "Moby-Dick," is shown to be "intent on an audacious immitigable and supernatural revenge" (p. 162) dominated by a compelling resolve to destroy the white whale. For Ahab, the white whale is the "monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung" (p. 160). Ahab's heart has been devoured by its own bitterness and so he is mad. His love for the cabin boy, Pip, and his brief touching of Starbuck, are the only expressions of human feeling that he allows himself on the Pequod. The internal struggle that Ahab is undergoing is made more compelling because, tragic figure that he is, he is aware of what is happening to him, wishes to reverse this process of freezing out his heart, but cannot alter what seems to be an irrevocable course of action. The reader feels compassion and awe at the magnitude of the struggle.

> 'What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare?' (pp. 444-45).

Deny the heart and invite disaster; Ahab destroys himself and all within his circumference. Similarly, Captain Vere repudiates his emotions when he warns the jury to disavow their hearts; Billy's destruction is followed quickly by Captain Vere's death.

Starbuck, the first mate of the Pequod, like Vere who is to follow, does not take full responsibility for his own actions, hiding behind forms, conventions, and laws. While many readers do not feel that Melville is criticizing Vere for calling "forms, measured forms" to his aid in subduing the sailors who are distraught at Billy's execution, in "The Specksynder" chapter of Moby-Dick, Melville does seem to be critical of men who hide behind "forms and usages."

> For a man's intellectual superiority what it will . . . can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments . . . . Such large virtue lurks in these small things when extreme political superstitions invest them that in some royal instances even to idiot imbecility they have imparted potency (p. 129).

Starbuck, the "good" man, moderate and compassionate, has the opportunity to destroy Ahab, realizes that Ahab has doomed the ship, but cannot take the painful step that will save the ship and the crew. He takes refuge in the law, just as Captain Vere does; a transcendent, heroic act that will save mankind is beyond him. He questions, "'But is there no other way? No lawful way? . . . . I stand alone here upon an open sea,

with two oceans and a whole continent between me and law' . . . . Starbuck seemed wrestling with an angel" (pp. 422-23).

We know what side the angels are one; so Starbuck, the ostensibly good man, weakly backs away from the ultimate decision and dooms the ship. Vere, similarly, has the power to save Billy Budd, but he also fears to stand alone without the support and endorsement of society's laws. For Vere, as for Starbuck, there is "no lawful way," and an ocean stands between himself and the machinery of the law. Starbuck does not seek moral backing; he does not ask if there is a "right way," but if there is a "lawful way." Sometimes there is a continent between the "law" and the "right," and men must face one way or the other. Vere chooses, as Starbuck chooses, to hide behind these "external arts and entrenchments" that could be called "laws" and conventions; they look towards the "law" and turn their backs on the "right."

Other motifs are heard in Moby-Dick that are to be repeated in some form in Billy Budd. For example, Claggart's face has a pallor, a whiteness, which, for Melville, has always connoted evil. The whale is white because the "one visible quality in the aspect of the dead which most appalls the gazer, is the marble pallor lingering there" (p. 166).

Another recurring note is the interest in the innately evil man. Although there is no figure such as Claggart in a central role in Moby-Dick, the interpolated "Town-Ho's Story" tells of a relationship between two men that presages the one

between Claggart and Billy Budd.

> . . . it is not seldom the case in this conventional world of ours - salty or otherwise; that when a person placed in command over his fellow-men finds one of them to be very significantly his superior in general pride of manhood, straightway against that man he conceives an unconquerable dislike and bitterness; and if he have a chance he will pull down and pulverize that subaltern's tower, and make a heap of dust of it. Be this conceit of man as it may, gentlemen, at all events Steelkilt was a tall and noble animal with a head like a Roman, and a flowing golden beard like the tasseled housings of your last viceroy's snorting charger; and a brain, and a heart, and a soul in him, gentlemen, which had made Steelkilt Charlemagne, had he been born son to Charlemagne's father. But Radney, the mate, was ugly as a mule; yet as hardy, as stubborn, as malicious (p. 211).

The similarity to the relationship between Claggart and Budd is obvious. Evidently some of the "motivation" for Claggart's hatred for Billy Budd had been anticipated in the story of Steelkilt in Moby-Dick.

Another character emerges from these pages who is also to reemerge, somewhat altered, as part of the cast of Billy Budd. The carpenter who makes Captain Ahab's leg is one of the old men of the sea, taciturn, extremely competent in their tasks, but also extremely reticent to communicate with others. The Dansker in Billy Budd, who sews and repairs the sails, is similar in that both have an understanding of what is at stake, but have no real desire to interfere, to become part of the world. They function, that is all; they do not participate. The carpenter is a "pure manipulator," who functions " by a

kind of deaf and dumb, spontaneous literal process" (p. 388). The Dansker sees and sews, but does not intrude on events. They are part of the universe, part of the "surrounding infinite of things, that seemed one with the general stolidity discernible in the whole visible world" (p. 388). In Billy Budd, the Dansker merely relates the truth to Billy, but he makes no attempt to advise, or act, nor does he care to. He is like the Carpenter in Moby-Dick, never undertaking to "wade out into deep water with tall, heron-built captains; the water chucks you under the chin pretty quick, and there's a great cry for lifeboats" (p. 392).

Just as Typee, Omoo, Redburn, and White Jacket were based on the actual experiences of Herman Melville, Moby-Dick also has an abundance of autobiographical elements that are submerged in the overwhelming mass of the book. Henry Murray's essay, "In Nomine Diaboli," suggests that in "portraying the consequences of Ahab's last suicidal lunge, the hero's umbilical fixation to the Whale and his death by strangling," the author demonstrates his attachment to his mother and his submission "to the binding power of the parental conscience, the Superego of middle-class America."[19] Melville's past continually erupted, sometimes in spurts, at other times in tremendous surges. Pierre, however, is the novel that is most often pointed to as the acme of the author's revelation of himself as son, as lover, and as artist.

In addition to the interesting autobiographical consider-

ations, Pierre is deeply involved with the problem of compromising principles in the face of impossible ideals. Taji, in Mardi, murdered to achieve his ideal, the lovely Yillah. Pursued by guilt, obsessed with this ideal, he was lured into the open sea and, probably, to his ultimate destruction. Ahab was also an idealist in that he pursued a single idea relentlessly, destroying everything in that pursuit. Pierre's determination to protect his illegitimate sister, his fanatical obsession with what he considers his moral responsibility, destroys his mother, his sister, his lover, and himself. All of these men, Taji, Ahab, and Pierre die for their ideals and, in the process, obliterate their worlds. While Melville's attitude appears to be flexible enough to accommodate the idea that monomania is dangerous as well as admirable, he very much exalts those who are not cowed by impossibilities, who follow their own private truths to the bitter end. It is this quality that makes man a creature for "noble tragedies." He says in Pierre, "Wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof that he came from thither! But whatso crawls contented in the moat before that crystal fort, shows it was born within that slime, and there forever will abide" (p. 347).

Vere, in a perverse way, belongs to this company in that he sacrificed his heart, or Billy, to what was, for him, a higher ideal - maintaining the stability of the social order. If we accept the wisdom of the pamphlet of Plotinus Plinlimmon in the chapter in Pierre called "Chronometricals and Horolo-

gicals" as Melville's belief, then we might readily admit that for Melville, Captain Vere exemplifies the way man should properly live in the "real" world. In the pamphlet we are told that "a virtuous expediency seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them" (p. 214). The pamphlet sets forth a situation in which if you follow Christ's morality, you will be rewarded by your conscience, but crucified by society. If society's "morality" is your motivating force, you will be rewarded by society, but punished by your conscience. Plinlimmon's morality is prudent, but Pierre, "symbol of the heedlessly warm heart, is more appealing to the average reader than is Plinlimmon, spokesman for the shrewdly cool head . . . . Pierre is rash, but that is not a defect for Melville."[20] In "Chronometricals and Horologicals" Melville sets up ultimately irreconcilable forces in the world, two dimensions of reality that clash eternally and absolutely. Although there is no way to reconcile these poles intellectually, Melville, in his emotional tie to Taji, Ahab, and Pierre, makes his choice. Captain Vere is prudent, devoting himself to the ideal of expediency, but in so doing he destroys in himself and others that which makes life possible - love and compassion.

Melville's stance on the unending battle between mind and heart is confirmed by his approach to the problems that underlie Pierre, as they do Billy Budd. Pierre muses on the char-

acter of Charles Millthrope, his kindly friend, good-natured, generous, and dependable.

> Plus heart minus head . . . the god that made Millthrope was both a better and a greater god than the god that made Napoleon or Byron - Plus head, minus heart - Pah! the brains grow maggoty without a heart; but the heart's the preserving salt itself, and can keep sweet without the head (p. 320).

When Captain Vere underscores this same conflict during the trial he tells the jury to ignore the heart, for it is the "feminine in man" and leads man away from the correct course of action. Critics who have discussed this issue have cited Vere's argument to indicate that Melville had changed in the years between Pierre and Billy Budd. But perhaps it should be considered that the sentiments expressed in Captain Vere's presentation before the court are there to move us against their spokesman and not toward him, as so many have avowed.

In Pierre, the dead father is the instrument that moves the action of the novel. He has been the whole "temple" of Pierre's "moral life . . . and the shrine is rubble because his father is a seducer."[21] The exposure of Pierre's father as morally reprehensible leads to Pierre's flight with Isabel, his break with his mother, and the eventual deaths of Lucy, Isable, his mother, and Pierre himself. Billy Budd, like Redburn, White Jacket, and Pierre in its strong autobiographical strain, also deals with the theme of the vulnerability of the young man to the cruelty of the father. Even Ahab destroys the crew that he was responsible for as a father is

responsible for his children. No matter what form the paternal figure takes, captain, government, navy, or revered memory, the father fails. Evidently Melville is very sensitive to the relationship of father and son; in Billy Budd, the relationship between Vere and Budd is often alluded to by Melville as fatherly. Melville's involvement in this concern may have been generated by the early death of his own father and perhaps because Herman Melville, as a father, had lived to see his own two sons die, one through a self-inflicted wound, the other succumbing to an illness three thousand miles away from home.

Perhaps no other work so closely parallels the philosophical interests of Billy Budd as does The Confidence Man. In the latter work, Melville is obviously and almost obsessively preoccupied with false appearances; the misanthrope is really a humanitarian and the men who parade as lovers of mankind are the malign figures. While the confidence man in all his various guises is a villainous character, the absolutely satanic figure in The Confidence Man is an Indian who is presented in an interpolated story referred to as "The Indian-hater." The story was actually a true one, told by a Colonel Hall. It tells of an Indian who hated because he had suffered under the white man, but he did not in any way disguise his perfidy, rushing in any direction, following any lead to accomplish his brutal revenge. Melville uses the story, but the revision and excisions he makes should be examined. In

Melville's retelling, he removes any element of the Indian's past life so that the wickedness is unexplained and unmotivated. Like Claggart in Billy Budd the Indian lacks a reason for what he does, for why he hates. Like Claggart, Melville depicts the Indian as hiding his furious hatred under a posture of cool placidity. Elizabeth Foster comments that in this work, "the evil is thrust close . . . the devil goes to and fro in the earth . . . the 'inscrutable malice' that Captain Ahab so hated reaches out for men, plays with them, and betrays them" (p. xv). Melville portrays in the Indian and in the confidence men, as he does in Claggart, the man who is the incarnation of evil, an evil without source and without end, an evil that assumes guises of kindness to better accomplish its aims. Motivation, for Melville, became an increasingly unnecessary component of evil. "How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?" (p. 36). Melville's conception of the inherently evil man that began with the comic villany of Jackson, continues to darken with each succeeding attempt to depict such a figure. From Jackson, to Bland, to Radney in the "Town'Ho Story," to the Indian, the grim line continues, connecting inexorably with Claggart.

Closely aligned to the innately malign man in The Confidence Man is the prudent man who is not overtly evil but treads the same path as the more obvious Satan. In a remark made by the Missourian, the so-called misanthrope who is really the humanitarian in the book, we can see the germ of

Captain Vere. In a discussion with the herb-doctor (the confidence man in another guise) the Missourian accuses the herb-doctor of harboring sentiments that are "picked and prudent . . . . You are the moderate man, the invaluable understrapper of the wicked man. You, the moderate man, may be used for wrong, but are useless for right" (p. 127). Vere is the personification of the prudent, moderate man, Claggart's understrapper who carries out Claggart's plan - the destruction of Billy Budd. Claggart could not do it alone; when stopped by death, his unconscious accomplice finished what he had begun.

At approximately the same time that The Confidence Man was published, Melville produced his two great short stories, Bartleby the Scrivener and Benito Cereno. Interestingly enough, they expand the image of the "moderate man," the prudent man who bolsters evil by assuming the role of an accessory, if not that of an initiator. The lawyer who is sympathetic to Bartleby, Captain Delano in Benito Cereno, are both moderate reasonable men who cannot cope with the reality of evil. They instinctively know what is "true" or "right," but they both turn aside, setting up screens to avoid confronting what they know to be the morally proper course of action. The lawyer in Bartleby feels that he should continue to help Bartleby, but he is more concerned with the reaction of his colleagues when they see Bartleby standing idly in the office; they will regard him as a fool, a spineless man who allows

himself to be put upon. He responds to the judgment of society by moving his offices to escape his responsibility for Bartleby.

Captain Delano, in turn, denies evil by refusing to see what he cannot help but see. His awareness that there is foul play aboard the ship comes in waves which he successfully, time and time again, beats back. Each time the fearful truth returns, he, "though ashamed of the relapse . . . could not altogether subdue it; and so, exerting his good nature to the utmost, insensibly . . . came to a compromise."[22] His deliberate blindness is predicated on an inner bias that dictates the impossibility of black people being clever enough to take over a ship, imprison the crew, and conspire to deceive outsiders. Captain Delano, like Lydgate in Middlemarch, has a "streak of commonness" that makes him underestimate the qualities of a group generally considered to be inferior by the community. Like Lydgate, he pays for his blindness and for his reliance on the opinion of others.

These stories comment upon moral responsibility which catches us off-guard, descending upon us without invitation or previous notice, unlike the kinds of obligation that we knowingly and willingly take on such as marriage, parenthood, and professional commitments. Unexpected responsibilities, no matter how painful or inconvenient, must be dealt with, and in our dealings we reveal outselves. Edgar Dryden describes these circumstances in the short stories and in Billy

Budd as ones in which "truth is revealed only when formal order is destroyed."[23] In Benito Cereno, Bartleby the Scrivener and Billy Budd, some unforeseen event intrudes on a familiar, comfortable, self-contained world, shattering its reality structure. The lawyer in Bartleby deliberately avoids unexpected situations and risky undertakings by his choice of a safe practice in financial rather than criminal law, admitting that he prudently sought out this branch of the law because it sustained a serene life. The narrator's hiring of Bartleby as a scribe, surely a common enough practice for a lawyer at the time, leads to totally startling complications. Captain Delano, in turn, boards Benito Cereno's ship to offer help and in so doing is following the accepted forms and conventions of the sea. He expects nothing out of the ordinary, but is suddenly confronted with events that land him in a kind of hell from which he barely escapes alive. Captain Vere is also precipitated into action by circumstances he could not predict. A moderate man, he tries to avoid problems aboard his ship by having Claggart confront Budd in the privacy of his quarters, but a blow from Budd's arm dashes Vere's world into a cacophony of conflicting, warring emotions.

In all these stories, moral responsibility is under the glass; their outcomes suggest that to relegate your conscience to anything outside yourself such as the law, prudence, convention, or simply the opinion of others, leads to personal danger and destruction. Each man is the center of moral

responsibility and, as with wheels, all the spokes return to the center, turn them as you will. Sometimes the acceptance of inner dictates can kill, as it does with Ahab and Pierre. Evil men such as Claggart, Bland, and Jackson have the excuse of their own malign nature, but the ostensibly good man, the careful, prudent, moderate man cannot be forgiven for turning aside.

The eternal conflict between good and evil is also a recurrent theme in Melville's poetry. The later poetry, the John Marr poems and Timoleon collection will be discussed in the next chapters because they were written at the same time that Billy Budd was in the process of development, but even the earlier works, such as Battle-Pieces published in 1866, demonstrate Melville's preoccupation with this conflict, one in which he was entangled throughout his life. In his discussion of Battle-Pieces, William Shurr contends that the poems are groups into two "cycles of thought . . . each cycle represents a single dominant idea by which the poet seems to understand the forces controlling events during the Civil War period."[24] The first cycle, according to Shurr, that of the cycle of law, fails to emerge as a sufficient means to understand the events of the Civil War, so that the second cycle, that of evil, supersedes it. The second group of poems, included in the cycle of evil, are concerned with a loss of innocence, one of the themes of Billy Budd. The Civil War represents the end of America's innocence and, in a sense, a

betrayal of America's promise of a new beginning. In "The March into Virginia," for example, war flourishes by the exploitation of innocence; with maturity comes an awareness of the evil that dominates the universe. Poems like "The College Colonel," and "In the Turret" deal with the change from the innocence of youth to the terrible knowledge that comes with maturity. In "Commemorative of a Naval Victory," Melville portrays a man condemned to isolation as are all people who carry the secret of what life is really about; they have plumbed the "mystery of iniquity" and are estranged by this knowledge from the uninitiated.

The symbols of the difficult and sometimes undecipherable Clarel cannot be overlooked in a study of Billy Budd. It is a narrative that turns on the lives of many pilgrims sharing a trip through the Holy Land, with the thread of a love story linking the whole structure. The Holy City, Jerusalem, is, in Melville's eyes, without life, like the desert by which it is surrounded. Just as the desert is a hell with no welcome for man, mankind in the Holy City has repeatedly ousted the good men among us. Melville describes Jesus' life and its effect on mankind:

> But worse came - creeds, wars, stakes. Oh, men
> Made earth unhuman; yes, a den
> Worse for Christ's coming, since his love
> (Perverted) did but venom prove. (II, xxi, 85-88)

The Christ imagery in Clarel, as in Billy Budd, simply serves to underline the inevitability of evil; there is goodness in

some men, but that goodness is only temporary when set against the reality which is evil. It seems that pure goodness, as in Christ or Billy Budd, becomes "perverted" and flushes out into the open all the "venom" in mankind. Jerusalem tormented and rejected divine goodness; Captain Vere and Claggart torment and destroy Billy Budd.

All of Palestine becomes the symbol for lost civilizations in which man's efforts are swallowed up and each successive effort produces the same outcome, a rise followed by the inevitable fall. There is a sense of total decay and hopelessness. Even the love story is doomed to failure. Man is alone in the universe with nothing but evil as his final reality. When this concept is finally dealt with in Billy Budd it remains unchanged. Evil and good will do battle in the persons of Billy Budd and Claggart, and good will initially triumph when Billy strikes Claggart dead. But that triumph, like the successive civilizations that rise and fall in Palestine, is the most temporary of triumphs. On the heels of Billy's blow will be Captain Vere's pronouncement, "'fated boy,'" and we know that the reign of goodness can be counted in mini-seconds. Captain Vere, the supposedly good, moderate, prudent man will carry though with even greater expedition the work of the wicked man.

Aspects of Billy Budd, then, can be traced throughout all of Melville's career. To regard the story, as some have done, as a product of his old age and softening of attitudes that

sometimes come with the later years, in unacceptable. Like most men, Melville grew and developed. Like most men, he discarded some beliefs and clung to others, but also, like most men, he did not undergo a radical change in his basic tenets. To regard Billy Budd as Melville's final statement, his "testment of acceptance," is to disregard his past life and past works. To ignore what we know about a work of literature, its precedents, the life and times of the writer, is to approach the work handicapped by tunnel vision. This is what has happened to Billy Budd; we have only seen part because we have accepted partial vision. It is time to break through the walls of the tunnel, enlarge our field of vision, while not forgetting to peer also into the corners and crevices that have remained hidden.

Notes

[1] Albert Camus, "Herman Melville" in Lyrical and Critical Essays (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1952), p. 205.

[2] William H. Shurr, The Mystery of Iniquity: Melville as a Poet, 1857-1891 (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1972), p. 261.

[3] Herman Melville, Typee, A Peep at Polynesian Life, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and Newberry Library, 1968), p. 124.

[4] Ibid., p. 125.

[5] Leyda, II, 715.

[6] Harrison Hayford, Afterward, Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life During a Four Months' Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas, by Herman Melville (New York: Signet, New American Library, 1964), p. 316.

[7] Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1967), p. 355. All subsequent citations from Moby-Dick will be from this edition, with the page references immediately following.

[8] Lyda, II, 296.

[9] Ibid., 354.

[10] Ibid., 292.

[11] Matthiessen, p. 129

[12] Herman Melville, Redburn His First Voyage: Being the Sailor-Boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son of a Gentleman in the Merchant Service (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), p. 85. All subsequent citations from Redburn will be from this editions, with the page references immediately following.

[13] Herman Melville, White Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and Newberry Library, 1970), p. 85. All subsequent citations from White Jacket will be from this edition, with page references immediately following.

[14] Longnecker, p. 337.

[15] Reed, p. 234.

[16] Mitchell, p. 111.

[17] Garner, "Fraud as Fact," p. 93.

[18] Herman Melville, Letters of Herman Melville, ed. Merrell Davis and William Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 129.

[19] Murray, "In Nomine Diaboli," p. 452.

[20] Murray, Introduction to Pierre, p. lxxviii.

[21] Ibid., p. xlv.

[22] Herman Melville, The Complete Stories of Herman Melville, ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Random House, 1949), p. 299.

[23] Edgar A. Dryden, Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 209.

[24] Shurr, p. 14.

[25] Herman Melville, Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, ed. Walter E. Bezanson (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1960), p. 210.

Chapter V

Herman Melville and Son

Some memories are a source of pleasure; these we keep stored within the easy reaches of our minds to provide comfort and solace. Other memories are stealthily covered over in the vain hope that they will remain buried forever, but the past is a tricky adversary. Painful moments from the past may be lost for a time in the silence of repression, but they pounce on any sign of weakening barriers, push through unguarded openings. The mind of the creative writer is particularly vulnerable to the resurgence of past torments because the substance of literature is, after all, a reordering of experienced events and feelings. Writing is an art that involves self-exposure. This is particularly true of the writing of Herman Melville who seems to be so full of his own life that it overflows onto the blank paper before him. In some authors personal history is apparently under tight control, but in others, such as Herman Melville, the past breaks out through every pore.

If has often been noted that art has a restorative touch. It is a means by which a person can objectify anxieties without overtly displaying his vulnerable undersides. While form in art usually facilitates understanding, sometimes, according to Simon Lesser, form is used to "convey things to us in such a way that certain meanings, those

most likely to produce anxiety, will not emerge too clearly."[1] This is probably a partial explanation for the ambiguities in Billy Budd. Indeed, evidence suggests that the often noted ambiguity in Billy Budd is tied up, in great part, with the fact that Melville started writing Billy Budd toward the end of his life, a time when the mounting pressure of memories from the past increasingly encroach on present concerns.

This chapter will demonstrate that a particular repressed idea from Melville's past exerts a pervasive influence over the characterization, the events, and the outcome of Billy Budd. In a recent study, David Gordon suggests that "if the unbalanced effects of a work are not coherent by themselves yet do make sense if we connect them to a missing and presumably repressed idea, then we can legitimately refer to the influence of the artist's unconscious mind."[2] Lesser, citing Billy Budd, contends that in a work of any importance there are important moral issues, but closer inspection usually "uncovers other meanings and other sources of vitality more directly connected with the central intention of the story and its impact upon us."[3] Both these points of view are helpful in speculating about the central concern of Billy Budd. Sometimes a repressed idea struggling to be recognized in the creative process will cause incoherence in the work as Gordon suggests. There are times, however, when these hidden meanings are a source of

vitality as Lesser claims.

To seek out the "missing and presumably repressed idea" we may usefully review what is known about Herman Melville in the years that he was struggling with Billy Budd. We know that Billy Budd stirred Melville's imagination during the last years of his life; we can surmise that Billy Budd must have been extremely important to Melville, prompting his return to prose after a hiatus of thirty-five years, important enough for him to continually expand and change the work. We also know that no fair copy of the story exists. We may conclude that this last prose work is unfinished, but whether or not Melville ever actually finished Billy Budd to his own satisfaction is unknown.

Melville started writing Billy Budd in the last years of his life, after having outlived both his sons. His oldest Malcolm, had killed himself in 1857 at the age of eighteen by putting a bullet through his head (whether an accident or suicide is not known) and his other son, Stanwix, died at the age of thirty-five in 1886, the year Melville began the poem that was to become Billy Budd. Simultaneous with the approaching end of Melville's life, a rather extraordinary series of events began to expose dust-covered memories, conspiring, one may suppose, to release the anguish of the past so long repressed. More particularly, a step-by step comparison of the chronology of immediate events going on around Melville at the time he was writing

Billy Budd with the chronology of the various revisions of Billy Budd points to the need for a reassessment of the father-son relationship depicted in the story. Indeed, the need for a revaluation of this relationship becomes more insistent when we undertake a new consideration of the text itself. This new examination supports the thesis that the father-son relationship of Captain Vere and Billy Budd was not just a vague projection of Melville's father and himself, but was, more significantly, a projection of Melville's son, Malcolm, and himself.

The concept of the relationship of Vere to Budd as analagous to that of father to son is, of course, not new. Melville himself alludes to it frequently in the text of Billy Buad, as will be demonstrated below. It has been the contention of many critics who have cited this relationship that Melville saw in the captain his own father who had died, leaving him stranded at a crucial period in his young life. Newton Arvin comments: "Melville was to spend much of his life divided between the attempt to retaliate upon his father for this abandonment and the attempt, a still more passionate one, to recover the closeness and the confidence of a happy sonhood."[4] Others concur that there is ambiguity in the portrayal of Captain Vere because Melville had mixed feelings towards this father figure who, they claim, in many ways resembles his own father; from Redburn to Billy Budd, Melville's search for a father seems

unresolved and painfully unrewarding. The general view is that the encounter of Billy and Vere at the end of Billy Budd is the reconciliation with his father that Melville had unsuccessfully sought all his life. But circling around the surface of the narrative are more recent memories needing only the urging of immediate events to make their power felt.

To ignore Melville's undoubted anguish over the loss of his sons, particularly the (self-inflicted) death of the oldest son, is to effectively close off a possible avenue to Billy Budd. An important study of the effect of death on the living has insisted that the

> . . . most distressing and long lasting of all griefs . . . is that for the loss of a grown child . . . . The parents never get over it. It seems as though the parents . . . interpret this as punishment for their own shortcomings, a sort of divine retribution, whether they are actively religious or not . . . . It seems as though their self-image may be destroyed.[5]

Freud recognizes the importance of the child to the parent in his essay "On Narcissism," in which he asserts that at the "most touchy point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego which is so hard pressed by reality, security is achieved by taking refuge in the child."[6] An exploration into the meaning of Billy Budd must take into account the influence of the death of Melville's oldest son because the story is, first and foremost, a tale of a young

sailor who dies because the man who felt fatherly towards him did not reach out to save him. The greatest narrative works, it has been pointed out, deal with "sacred crimes," such as "incest and parricide, cruelty of parents to children and children to parents . . . ."[7]

The involvement of Malcolm Melville's death in the development of Billy Budd has been briefly alluded to by other critics, but always in passing. Richard Chase refers to it summarily by suggesting that the reason Melville could not give his last work "artistically cogent language" was that the author was too involved with the figure of Billy Budd, possibly picturing his own son Malcolm.[8] Kingsley Widmer also mentions this problem, saying that Vere's submission to injustice must be traced to Melville's guilt for having "outlived both his sons." Widmer continues: "I only mean to suggest how Melville could be positively identified with Vere, and the undeniable ambiguities of Billy Budd could be related to the deepest personal guilt and rationalization of the author."[9] A more recent study claims that Melville was concerned with whether he had been a good parent; he could neither "approve nor condemn his own action or Vere's, so he was haunted by what at least was incontestable . . . that he loved his son, and that his son was dead."[10]

Between the death of young Malcolm at the age of eighteen and the first attempt at Billy Budd, nineteen years

elapsed. Early in 1886 Melville was in the process of writing a series of poems to be entitled John Marr and Other Sailors in which elderly sailors reminisce about their younger years; each poem is preceded by a headnote sketch which briefly outlines the circumstances leading to the old sailor's present situation, the point at which the poem begins. Following the same format, Melville wrote the poem that is now the ballad of "Billy in the Darbies" which ends the story of Billy Budd. When Melville wrote this poem early in 1886 Billy was characterized as a mature man condemned to die for mutiny. Shortly after the poem was written, the Melvilles received word that their remaining son, Stanwix, had died in California on February 23, 1886. According to the evidence of the manuscripts, when Billy Budd resurfaced in November of 1888 in prose form, it was evident that many changes had taken place during the two years that had passed. In this second version Melville had expanded the headnote sketch into a story, introduced the figure of Claggart, incorporated the ballad into the tale and, most significantly, the sailor, Billy, had been metamorphosed into a much younger man about the age of his son, Malcolm, at the time of his death.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the second son's death brought about a resurgence of feelings concerning the death of the other son nineteen years before. Otto Fenichel claims that the reliving of trauma does not occur

only in dreams; it is in part conscious. He claims that "repressed forces make a more or less open reappearance after traumata."[11] Freud says that "mental work" in the creative artist "is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes, a day-dream or phantasy . . . ."[12] In a later work, Freud asserts that although earlier mental states may not have manifested themselves for years, "every earlier stage of development persists alongside the later stage which has arisen from it; here succession also involves coexistence."[13] We are cautioned by Richard Ellmann, however, that in the "works of a writer's maturity," the complexes manifested in childhood are overlaid with "more recent and impinging intricacies."[14] For Herman Melville, the death of his remaining son, Stanwix, may have ripped open a painfully deep wound out of which Malcolm emerged as Billy Budd.

The picture of Malcolm that takes shape from his few appearances in extant journals and letters is that of a good-natured, fun-loving, extremely popular young man, and in these characteristics he resembled the young Billy. Like Malcolm, the "new" Billy constantly found himself in petty trouble involving the storing of his bag, a problem with his hammock, or the spilling of his soup on deck. In 1860, Melville wrote a letter which suggests that Malcolm was also prone to petty disobedience, causing his

mother problems, although they were always of a minor nature.[15] Like Malcolm, the "new" Billy had a "frank enjoyment of young life" (p. 78). The comments made shortly after Malcolm's death make it evident that he was fond of socializing, so much so that his father had taken away his house keys to prevent his returning home at late hours.

The older Billy in the original ballad was guilty of mutiny and therefore merited his death; in the new version Billy is blameless and has to be betrayed. Melville, now portraying Billy as an innocent, has to bring about his destruction from the outside. Claggart appears in the tale as the overt agent of Billy's death, but Billy, like Malcolm, was to bring about his own end. Both the young Billy and Malcolm struck the blows that ended their lives and in the sense that Billy so willingly acquiesced to his execution, he almost willed his own death.

In-between the initial undertaking of the poem about Billy Budd in 1886 and the appearance of the prose version in November of 1888, a second event occurred that was to be crucial to the working out of Billy Budd. The notorious affair of the mutiny on the U.S. Somers which had occurred fifty years previously was brought again to the public's attention by a number of articles published over a period of two years, from 1887 to 1890. Briefly, the Somers affair was one in which Herman Melville's cousin, Guert Gansevoort, had been directly involved. In 1841 Lt. Gansevoort re-

ported to his captain that three young sailors were plotting a mutiny; one of them, Philip Spencer, was the son of the then Secretary of War. They were found guilty by a court-martial headed by Gansevoort and quickly hanged. There had been a public outcry against the hangings in 1841 and an examination of family letters shows there was extensive discussion about the affair in the Melville family. According to Charles Anderson, in his "The Genesis of Billy Budd," "it seems more than probable that Melville read these accounts of a sea-tragedy in which his intimate kinsman Guert Gansevoort had played a leading and somewhat ambiguous role."[16]

Now there were two events that had coalesced in Melville's memories; initially the death of his second son, and secondarily the resurrection of the Somers affair. Whereas the death of Stanwix had resurrected the figure of Malcolm, the articles about the mutiny on the Somers in the periodicals enriched and complicated the figure by bringing to light a boy not unlike Malcolm who was condemned to death by a close cousin of Melville's. Anderson points out that Melville must have been thinking of Guert Gansevoort in 1888, because in his volume of John Marr poems published that year there are two unmistakeable references to his cousin.[17] The papers on the mutiny seem to confirm that his cousin, Guert, to whom Melville had referred in 1862 as a "good seaman"and "brave as a lion,"[18] had acted unjustly.

Evidently Melville admired his cousin, but he regarded the event itself differently. In 1850, in White Jacket, he demonstrates the brutality of the "bloodthirsty" Articles of War by citing the hangings on the Somers. "What happened to those three Americans, White Jacket - those three men, even as you, who once were alive, but now are dead?" (p. 294)

Philip Spencer, one of the three hanged, was revealed as a young mischievous boy about Malcolm's age who had evidently concocted a prank to while away time. Philip's foolishness brought about his death, just as Malcolm's end possibly came about through the careless handling of a gun. In both cases, boyish spirits may have led to death.

The first of these articles was published in the American Magazine in May 1888 by a naval Lt. Smith. Called "Mutiny on the 'Somers,'"[19] it is an unabashed attempt to exonerate the captain of the ship. As this article intimately concerned the Melville family and was published in a New York magazine, it seems logical to suppose that the appearance of the report based on the court-martial papers would have reopened discussions of the incident among members of the family.

In June of 1889 Cosmopolitan Magazine, evidently responding to the renewed popular interest in the Somers matter, published "The Murder of Philip Spencer" in a three-part series. This retelling of the hanging of Philip Spencer is distinct in quality, tone, and emotional content from the

report of Lt. Smith in American Magazine. Gail Hamilton's articles are charged with emotion; no opportunity is lost to make Lt. Gansevoort and Captain MacKenzie look anything shortof satanic, while Philip Spencer and the other young sailors emerge as innocent boys who had nothing on their minds but a prank. These articles are certainly not objective journalism, and they serve to arouse even the most sophisticated reader at the slaughter of these young boys. As this series was published in New York, it again seems probable that they were seen by the Melville family.

Gail Hamilton characterizes Philip Spencer as a "careless generous boy with a boy's interest in jack-knife curiosities."[20] The incriminating paper found discussed a planned meeting, "such a paper as might be devised by a mischievous imp of a boy who was planning a joke for a lot of landlubbers."[21] The commander, as portrayed by Hamilton, seems to combine the characteristics of both Claggart and Vere. Like Claggart, the commander assumed a theory of mutiny and then swore to it before a witness. Evidently the commander's own statement from the released papers shows that his hurry to hang Spencer was precipitated not by fear of a general mutiny, but by a fear of saving Spencer's life by delay. We recall the tyrannical rashness of "controlled" men that was of concern to Melville in his previous works.

Part III of the series reveals events that make it

almost unavoidable to suppose that Melville remembered many of the details from his cousin Lt. Gansevoort's account many years before. The last words of Spencer before he was hanged were said privately to the commander; no one knows what was actually said. In Melville's Billy Budd, Captain Vere met with Billy privately to reveal the sentence of the drumhead court; the reader is never privy to the scene. Only the facial expression of Vere as he leaves the cabin is open to public scrutiny. Some critics have questioned Melville's motivation for not dramatizing the last meeting between Billy and Captain Vere; the answer may partly lie in his following the actual events as revealed by his cousin and later reported in the Gail Hamilton articles in Cosmopolitan Magazine.

There was another article that appeared after those in the American Magazine and Cosmopolitan Magazine. In July 1890 a piece appeared in United Service, a monthly review of military and naval affairs published in Philadelphia, in which a retired officer who signs himself R. C. R. reminisces about his relationship with Philip Spencer. Two pieces of evidence make it probable that Melville saw this article. The first, rather meager but intriguing, is the author R. C. R.'s use of the phrase, "banned and fated" to express a "latent influence which we may deride but often fear."[22] This is almost duplicated by Melville's statement that Claggart would have loved Billy if not for "fate and

ban" (p. 88). More importantly, the description of Sommes in the articles, the new commander of the U.S. Somers after the hanging incident, is so reminiscent of Vere that Melville's reading of the article in the United Service can hardly be in doubt. R. C. R. describes Sommes in the following manner:

> I have seen him, almost daily, standing aft, clinging to a backstay, looking in a fixed direction, and then with that bending of his eye on vacancy, as if he either with the 'incorporeal air held discourse,' or as if in reflection or introspection. . . .[23]

Melville describes Captain Vere similarly as at times betraying

> a certain dreaminess of mood. Standing alone on the weather side of the quarter-deck, one hand holding by the rigging, he would absently gaze off at the blank sea (p. 61).

One other article appeared that should be mentioned to complete the sequence, but I am discussing this article out of chronological order (it was published in February of 1887) because it is not as probable that Melville saw it as it was published in a magazine not as widely circulated as the others. The Magazine of American History printed a letter discovered by a relation of Commander MacKenzie, the commander who sentenced the three on the Somers to die. In this letter, the commanding officer attempts to exonerate himself from blame, to, in effect, justify his actions.

There are two aspects of the letter that make it worthy of our notice. The tone is hysterical, almost paranoic when addressing itself to the Chief Justice in charge of the court-martial proceedings. The most salient example is the evidence that the commander uses to "absolutely confirm" the guilt of the three sailors. When he approached them directly to ask them if they had planned a mutiny, he tells the judge, they made a complete denial. Commander MacKenzie reasons, "must not the universal denial and profession of total ignorance have increased and justified our suspicions of universal guilt." This is the evidence of the Salem witch trials; if you confess you are burned at the stake; if you are innocent you prove it by allowing yourself to be drowned. The use of false logic to justify irrational action was also the approach used by Captain Vere, as depicted by Melville.

The second aspect that piques our interest is MacKenzie's use of the expression "forms" to demonstrate that he followed regular naval procedures.

> . . . in executing the law of which the ringleaders had incurred the penalty, I observed as many of the <u>forms</u> as were within my reach; and and that those <u>forms</u> which would have been perfect had I been a flag officer . . . .[25] (emphasis added).

It is impossible not to wonder whether this article was not in Melville's mind when he wrote of Vere's explanation of

his own actions: "'forms, measured forms, are everything . . . .'" (p. 128).

Melville had known the story of the Somers mutiny since he was a young man, but confronted with a quick succession of magazine articles describing a young boy similar to Malcolm in age and temperament who was destroyed by a close member of Melville's own family, he chose to use it now. While it would be "absurd and uncritical," according to Newton Arvin, to claim that Captain Vere is "based" on Melville's cousin, Arvin does admit that "in the creation of that character . . . Melville can hardly have been unaffected by his memory of Guert Gansevoort's painful dilemma."[26] The facts show it was some time after the appearance of these articles that Captain Vere assumed predominance in the story and became the "father" who destroys his "son." Hayford and Sealts admit that "the Somers case was in some way related to the emergence of Captain Vere and creation of the trial scene" (p. 30).

The sequence of events that took place in Herman Melville's life from 1886 to 1891, the years he struggled with Billy Budd, not only hints at a possible explanation for Melville's shifting attitude towards Captain Vere, but it also clarifies the soaring descriptions of Billy that are without parallel in the Melville canon. During the course of the narrative he is compared to classical and biblical heroes. The idealized descriptions of Bulkington in Moby-

Dick and of Jack Chase in White Jacket never reach the joyous quality or contain the tender emotionality of the words that describe Billy Budd, words that one critic calls "overwhelmingly moving"[27] and another characterizes as "rhapsodic."[28] What other image in Melville's works matches the "handsome sailor," the superb figure "tossed up as by the horns of Taurus against the thunderous sky, cheerily hallooing to the strenuous file along the spar" (p. 44)? It is Freud's contention that an examination of the "attitude of affectionate parents toward their children" demonstrates that "they are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child . . . and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings."[29]

Billy is described by Melville as young, although he was twenty-one, an age of some maturity in 1891. He has a "lingering adolescent expression" on his face (p. 50). His coloring is described as very gentle for a sailor; "the lily was quite suppressed and the rose had some ado visibly to flush through the tan" (p. 50). After Malcolm died, Melville wrote to a friend: "I wish you could have seen him as he lay in his last attitude, the ease of a gentle nature."[30] The image of tender, vulnerable youth persists to the end of the story when Billy is sleeping away the last night of his life. Melville again describes him as "adolescent," and even though he is chained between two deck guns he is like a "slumbering child in the cradle when the warm hearth-

glow of the still chamber at night plays on the dimples that at whiles mysteriously form in the cheek" (p. 119). The impulse toward these loving descriptions may be better understood if we consider that Billy may have represented for Melville his lost son, glorified through the distance of nineteen years.

The descriptions of Billy were evidently of central importance to Melville. When he started recopying the manuscript on November 16, 1888 he made two important additions; he tacked on the characterization of Captain Graveling and revised the description of the Dansker. Both these characters serve n important function; they react to Billy's special magic. The Dansker, taciturn, unsmiling, an "isolato," makes some tentative movements toward Billy; he cannot resist the radiant boy. Billy is shown touching the heart of this man who unbends to no one else, who goes so far as to rename him affectionately Baby Budd. Interestingly enough, Melville wrote over his description of the Dansker in the manuscript "flaw?" perhaps realizing that something in the figure jarred. Barron Freeman interprets this to mean that the Dansker's self-contained air does not fit in with his talkiness on past deeds.[31] Whether or not we agree with Melville's evaluation, what is important for us in this study is that while Melville recognized some problem with the portrait of the old sailor, the Dansker's role in the drama was of such consequence to Melville that he did

not remove it even though he acknoweledged it to involve a "flaw."

When Captain Graveling describes Billy, his is the voice of a loving father talking about an adored son that is lost to him. Anticipating the painful change in his life to come with the loss of Billy, Captain Graveling explains that with Billy on board the ship was a "happy family." He tells how the crew cares for Billy as if he were a precious child. "'Some of 'em do his washing, darn his old trousers for him; the carpenter is at odd times making a pretty little chest of drawers for him'"(p. 47). These domestic details describe a family caring for its child. Checking a "rising sob," Graveling calls Billy the "jewel" among the others, something "like himself" in some ways, expressions that parents often use to characterize their children. When Billy was impressed for the warship, with him went all joy for Graveling. Even the little rituals that give comfort, such as enjoying a quiet pipe at night, no longer give solace. The appropriateness of a ship captain describing a common seaman in such superlatives, especially a supposedly simple man like Captain Graveling, may be questioned, but for his role of father in the story the description is appropriate and does not seem emotionally excessive. It is, rather, extremely significant.

The characters of the Dansker and Captain Graveling function in another important way; they mirror the role of

Vere in that they also are failed fathers to Billy. Both men are unknowing accomplices in Billy's death in that Graveling delivers him over to his executioner and Dansker, realizing Billy's imminent danger, makes no real move to help. Apparently the theme of Billy as a vibrant young boy doomed by a loving father became so increasingly important to Melville that even when attempting a fair copy he felt impelled to amplify the characters of the Dansker and Captain Graveling.

The sequence of events from 1886 to 1891 may also explain Melville's shifting attitude towards Captain Vere. Perhaps the wavering reflects Melville's appraisal of his own life and actions, particularly as a father. "In Captain Vere," says one critic, is the "essence of the later Melville."[32] It is possible that Captain Vere haunts us because Melville depicts the character from the ambivalent attitude that he has toward himself; Melville may be portraying a man whom he understands as he understands himself, a man who desperately wanted to reach out to his son and could not, or would not. If in the relationship between Vere and Budd there is the undercurrent of the relationship of Melville and Malcolm trying to come to terms, then this repressed current has served to enlarge, enrich, and complicate the portrait of the captain. Captain Vere, the center of the story emotionally and morally, serves Melville as a mirror in which he examines himself, judges himself,

and becomes his own executioner.

There are many other qualities that Vere and Melville share besides that of the failed father. For example, Melville, as has often been noted, makes much of the importance of reading to Vere. The many annotated volumes that passed through Melville's hands attest to his own extensive reading. Vere's reading, like Melville's, did not take place in the university but was "unshared studies modifying and tempering the practical training of an active career" (p. 109). The same could be said of Melville, whose formal schooling ended in his early adolescence and who did not begin to read seriously until after his sailing days were over.

The reading that was an integral part of Vere's life set him apart from the other officers; he would quote from the classics to make a point, seeming "unmindful . . . that to his bluff company such remote allusions . . . were alien" (p. 63). There is a persistent sense of his not belonging, of his being "like a King's yarn in a coil of navy rope" (p. 63). A reading of Melville's letters, journals, and comments in his favorite books makes it indisputable that a sense of not fitting in, of being misunderstood, was a constant throughout his life. In his last year, while reading in Schopenhauer, he underscored the following lines: "the more a man belongs to posterity . . . the more of an alien he is to his contemporaries."[33] Richard Harter Fogle

notes that "Melville's well known disinclination for society in his later years was partly attributable to his hopelessness of being understood."[34] Although always surrounded by his family, Melville was essentially an isolated man, instrospective and moody. Similarly, although Vere was surrounded by the personnel on his ship, a situation that almost mandates a sense of society, his officers found him "lacking in the companionable quality" (p. 63). Melville, like Captain Vere, was only in part a social being.

In an article about "Timoleon," a poem that Melville published in the last years of his life, Darrel Abel notes that the poem is "unified by its varied reiteration of the theme that preoccupied his thoughts at the close of his career - that bold and original thinking alientates artists and intellectuals from their fellowmen."[35] In "The Specksynder" chapter of Moby-Dick, Melville claims that men become famous not because of their superiority over the masses, but because of their inferiority to the "handful of the Divine Inert" (p. 129); the latter will not stoop to use the devices that bring political power. In a letter to Richard Bentley in 1849, Melville comments that Bentley may have thought it unwise for him to have written Mardi, a work not calculated to please the general reader "but some of us scribblers . . . always have a certain something unmanageable in us, that bids us do this or that, and be done it must - hit or miss."[36] It was like Vere's honesty that

prescribed "directness, sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier" (p. 63). Melville understood the feelings he had given to Vere in this regard; he understood Vere as he understood himself. But he did not necessarily condone Vere's actions - the struggle within Vere was his own.

The relationship between Vere and Billy, like the characterization of Vere himself, fluctuates between positive and negative poles. Melville compares the two to Abraham and Isaac, with Vere as the archetypal figure of the father who offers his son up as sacrifice to a "greater" idea or set of standards. The bond of God the Father and Jesus is also implied. While Malcolm was not sacrificed by Melville, neither was he saved. The relationship between Herman Melville and his son is actually somewhat obscure, although some evidence suggests that the family felt that he had been overly severe with Malcolm who seemed less serious and more playful than his father had been as a child. After Malcolm killed himself, a letter from an aunt to another member of the family expressed her belief that Herman Melville had been too strict a father.[37] It would be extraordinary if Melville did not feel a sense of guilt for somehow not forestalling the terrible event, if not for actually causing it.

The relationship between Vere and Budd is also compared, peripherally, to that of Jacob and Joseph. When Claggart

tells Vere about Budd's supposed plans for mutiny, Claggart regards him with a "look such as might have been that of the spokesman of the envious children of Jacob deceptively imposing upon the troubled patriarch the blood-dyed coat of young Joseph" (p. 96). Joseph was, of course, the beloved son of Jacob's old age. As all of these biblical analogies demonstrate, the relationship between Vere and Budd glowed with a special fire, just as the relationship between Melville and Malcolm had become one of special magnitude, probably through the boy's tragic death.

Although Melville consistently demonstrates the presence of a special link between Vere and Billy, a faltering in Vere's feelings toward Budd becomes evident when Claggart is accidentally killed. When the young sailor is paralyzed, unable to defend himself, Vere, recognizing the vocal impediment, tells Billy to take time in answering. Melville explains that "contrary to the effect intended, these words, so fatherly in tone, doubtless touching Billy's heart to the quick, prompted yet more violent efforts at utterance - effor - soon ending . . . in confirming the paralysis" (p. 99). It was because the words were "so fatherly in tone" that Billy felt pushed into ending the silence by striking out, so that it was Vere's adoption of the role of a father that, in effect, killed Billy, albeit "contrary to the effect intended." After the blow is struck, instantly Captain Vere says, "'fated boy,'" before actually knowing that the blow

has been fatal (p. 99). Moments later he explains to the surgeon that "'the angel must hang'" (p. 101). The scene portrays Vere's puzzling attitude toward the tragedy - terrible pain at what he sees as inevitable, coupled with an urgency to destroy the innocent "angel." Perhaps Melville portrays Vere as immediately seeing Billy as a dead man because in Billy is the hanged Philip Spencer of the Somers, and in Billy is Malcolm who has been dead for nineteen years.

Hayford and Sealts' introductory matter to their edition of Billy Budd stresses the point that the characterization of the surgeon is one of the last changes made by Melville. The surgeon wonders whether Vere's mind has been affected by the recent events. The agitation in Vere's behavior is, according to the surgeon, "unwonted," suggesting that he may have been a victim of an "aberration." Does Melville insert the section about the surgeon to explain Captain Vere's reaction (or perhaps over-reaction) to the crime of a common seaman? Did he realize that the scene was so off balance as he reworked the tale and as a counterbalance inserted the possibility of momentary madness to explain the pain, the agony of Vere? Perhaps it was to close to his own and he could deal with it in no other way.

The trial scene, that masterly demonstration of a mind struggling against itself, now becomes a little clearer.

On the one hand Vere wants to save Billy; on the other hand he knows he cannot. Malcolm is dead; Billy is dead. Throughout the trial when Billy is confronted with a question "touching on a spiritual sphere" (p. 107) Billy turns to the captain for aid. Billy casts "an appealing glance towards Captain Vere as deeming him his best helper and friend . . . ." (p. 107). Billy turns a "wistful interrogative look toward the speaker, a look in its dumb expressiveness not unlike that which a dog of generous breed might turn upon his master" (p. 107). He seeks in the captain's "face some elucidation of a previous gesture ambiguous to the canine intelligence" (pp. 107-8).

Earlier in the scene Billy is able to respond to direct questions from the court not being "so much impeded in the utterance as might have been anticipated" (pp. 105-6). He is "recalled to self-control by another question to which [he replies] with the same emotional difficulty of utterance" (p. 106).

> 'No, there was no malice between us. I never bore malice against the master-at-arms. I am sorry that he is dead. I did not mean to kill 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, God help me!' (p. 106).

Evidently he is capable of response and while it seems consistent with Billy's characterization that he turns to the captain for help and support when the questions become

difficult, the words and phrases that Melville uses are too feeble, too impotent, and too disparaging of Billy's manhood considering the former description of Billy as the "handsome sailor" and the other responses that the young sailor was able to make. These expressions, such as "appealing," "wistful," "dumb expressiveness," "not unlike a dog," "canine intelligence," which describe Billy in his relationship to the captain at the trial, seem to me to suggest some loss of control on the part of Melville at this painful juncture in the story when Billy turns to the man who was "fatherly" toward him for help, and is doomed by that "help."

Melville's picture of Vere during the trial is the most startling ambiguity in the book. In many ways the arguments propounded by Captain Vere to convince the court that Billy must hang are telling. They are well considered, as a thinking, feeling, just man might logically work out a puzzling problem. Yet, while the reader is often moved and even convinced by Vere's argument that the law must be maintained, the men on the drumhead court are not. These men, called by Vere "judicious," "thoughtful," and of "honest natures" (p. 105), are "less convinced than agitated by the course of an argument troubling but the more the spontaneous conflict within" (p. 111). Vere's anticipation of the objections of the court are illustrative of his own seesawing between his feelings and his

reason, and it is this teetering between poles that makes the scene so compelling. We are witnessing a man ripping himself apart, arguing against himself, desperate to hold out his hand but unable to let himself go. This ambiguous but powerfully rendered trial scene could be better deciphered if Captain Vere were understood to be Melville, the father, not wanting his son to die but totally unable to undo what has already happened. It would explain the anguish in Captain Vere's speech, his intensity, his sadness allied with an almost rigid determination to follow a course that is already inevitable. The tension lends power, perhaps because, as Joseph Wood Krutch suggests, good fiction "seems usually to have been achieved by the imagination of a writer whose mind was to some extent divided against itself."[38]

After Billy is condemned, Vere offers to relay to him the terrible findings of the court. The encounter between the two, however, is never directly described. This may be related to known facts about the Somers mutiny; the last exchange between the captain and Philip Spencer had no witnesses. But perhaps another reason was more determining. It may have been extremely difficult for Melville to imagine a dialogue between a father and son in which the father admits that the son is to die, doomed by his own father. How else can we explain that so crucial an encounter was left dramatically untouched? Instead, Melville implies that the

meeting between Budd and Vere may have been an emotional one for the captain because Vere "was old enough to have been Billy's father" (p. 115). This compassionate view of Vere is quickly rescinded when we are reminded by Melville that Vere may have caught young "Billy to his heart, even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest" (p. 115). The picture of Vere zigzags within that sentence from loving father to harsh patriarch.

When Billy utters the words "'God bless Captain Vere!'" the narrator says that the captain, "either through stoic-control or a sort of momentary paralysis, induced by emotional shock, stood rigid as a musket" (pp. 123-4). How are these famous last words to be understood? Is it merely the mimicking of the traditional last words of a condemned felon by Melville, or does it indicate that Billy understands and forgives his captain? Or is Billy's farewell best understood as a fulfillment of Melville's deepest wish - to be forgiven by his son? It may also satisfy one of the two main unconscious aims of the poet, according to Hanns Sachs, "the relief of his guilt-feelings."[39]

Perhaps the description of Billy's death also fulfills another aspect of Melville's wish - to prevent Billy-Malcolm from dying. When Billy is hanged, in view of the entire crew, "Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn" (p. 124). The sailors who witnessed the hanging

recall his face and feel him "mysteriously gone" (p. 131). They all wonder at the lack of a "spasm" at death, which is typically symptomatic of death by hanging. Since all these men that comment on Billy's hanging witnessed his execution, Melville's use of the words, "mysteriously gone" is puzzling. Why mysterious? Though readers who draw a close parallel between Billy and Christ claim that the words are Melville's attempt to manifest Billy's divine nature and eventual resurrection, they may be better explained as Melville's way of dealing with Malcolm's death - a denial, or an attempt to make death not as absolute as it was in actuality. In more prosaic terms, Malcolm's death was actually "mysterious" in that it was never really known whether his death was a suicide or an accident. Unsolved problems have a way of retaining their vitality; it is difficult to put them to rest.

The lines that end the ballad of "Billy in the Darbies" make that Billy's death very final indeed: "But me they'll lash in hammock, drop me deep,/ Fathoms down, fathoms down . . . and the oozy weeks about me twist" (p. 132). That Billy, however, was a different Billy, an older Billy, conceived in a time when Melville's second son, Stanwix, was still alive. Melville could visualize his rolling on the ocean floor, a carcass pushed by the currents, but the second Billy, conceived by Melville after Stanwix's death, was young like Malcolm, innocent like Malcolm. Melville could

not have him die again.

One word more on the tie between Vere and Melville himself. In the ironic statement of the naval chronicle which almost ends the story, the guilt and innocence of Claggart and Budd are completely reversed and the pivotal figure, Captain Vere, is not mentioned at all. Hayford and Sealts suggest that this is an oversight on Melville's part; it is additional proof that the manuscript was not completed. The implication is that he would have corrected this "oversight" if he had completed a fair copy. Although this textual problem remains unresolved, there are two reasons to conjecture that Melville deliberatley left the naval chronicle as it stands at present. In the twenty-first chapter, he foretells the reversal of the naval report.

> . . . in the light of that martial code whereby it was formally to be judged, innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places. In a legal view the apparent victim of the tragedy was he who had sought to victimize a man blameless; and the indisputable deeed of the latter, navally regarded, constituted the most heinous of military crimes (p. 103).

Billy committed the "most heinous of military crimes" in the "light of that martial code." Therefore the chronicle is accurate when "navally regarded."

Secondly, it is of some interest to note that Vere, in the naval chronicle, is treated exactly as Melville had been treated after his initial rise to fame as the author

of Typee and Omoo. After the success of these first novels, the remainder of Melville's life was a steady descent into literary obscurity. Herman Melville, like Captain Vere, became the forgotten man.

Melville's concluding statement about Vere is that "the spirit that 'spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fullness of fame" (p. 129). The desire for recognition, if that is ambition, also underscored Melville's last years as his comments in books and in letters amply illustrate. For example, shortly before 1886 he underlined in an essay, "they are like certain men of genius who remain always obscure because they are all genius, having no vulgar profitable talents."[40] In 1890, in Balzac's The Two Brothers, Melville underlined the comparison between the two brothers, one "coarse, blustering" was considered a man of genius, while the other was "puny, sickly, with unkempt hair and absent mind, seeking peace, loving quiet, and dreaming of an artist's glory."[41] Melville's feelings are in no way ambiguous in these notations. He feels himself at the end of a struggle, unrecognized and unappreciated.

Evidently Melville understood that in Billy Budd he had created a tale that lacked some coherence. Stanton Garner accounts for this problem by claiming that Melville deliberately introduces errors"[42] to write an anti-history,"[43]

but perhaps the presence of these errors attest to Melville's difficulty in coming to grips with emotionally laden subject matter at a time of his life when increasing infirmity made him less alert to "errors" within the story. Melville warns us at the end that this tale lacks "symmetry of form" and is "less finished than an architectural finial" because it has "less to do with fable than with fact" (p. 128). "Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges," he explains (p. 128). But despite Melville's admonition to the contrary, the reader's inability to take hold of the tale has often led him to seek out symbolism and allegory as a means of explaining its puzzling aspects. If the tale has to do with "fact," why is Claggart so inhumanely evil; why is Billy painted in such unearthly hues?

When we examine the creative process through which Melville reworked intensely felt personal experience into art, answers begin to form. The strong probability exists that Melville saw in Billy his own lost son Malcolm, and himself in the captain who dies with the name of his son on his lips, and that these powerful feelings give Billy Budd its intensity and poignancy. James Joyce describes the imaginative process of writing in a way that makes Melville's process a little clearer.

> As we . . . unweave our bodies . . . from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does

> the artist weave and unweave his image. And as the mole on my right breast is where it was when I was born, though all my body has been woven of new stuff time after time, so through the ghost of the unquiet father the image of the unliving son looks forth. In the intense instant of imagination . . . that which I was is that which I am . . . .[44]

This stirring of repressed emotion makes Billy Budd a disquieting work that has compelled readers to return to the same pages over and over again.

This tale, however, is more than a chronicle of emotions; there are profound philosophical and moral concerns that make Billy Budd so rich a subject matter, but it is the emotional quality that calls to us and does not let us be. While Melville could not relive the events of his life, he could reinvent them, so into Billy Budd he poured his most painful memories, half repressed and unresolved, and in the process created one of the great works of American literature.

Notes

[1] Lesser, p. 125.

[2] Gordon, p. xvi.

[3] Lesser, p. 65.

[4] Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), p. 23.

[5] Geoffrey Gorer, Death, Grief, and Mourning (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1965), p. 121.

[6] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey, XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 90.

[7] Lesser, pp. 106-7.

[8] Richard Chase, Introduction to Herman Melville, Selected Tales and Poems (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. xiv.

[9] Widmer, p. 31.

[10] Jane Mushabac, "Humor in Melville," Diss. City Univeristy of New York 1977, p. 290.

[11] Otto Fenichel, The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1945), pp. 120-22.

[12] Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," pp. 147-48.

[13] Sigmund Freud, "The Disillusionment of the War," in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey, XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 285.

[14] Richard Ellmann, Golden Codgers (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 4.

[15] Leyda, II, 626.

[16] Charles Robert Anderson, "The Genesis of Billy Budd," American Literature, 12 (1940), 342.

[17] Ibid., p. 338.

[18] Leyda, II, 652.

[19] Lt. H. D. Smith, "The Mutiny on the 'Somers,'" American Magazine, 1 May 1888, pp. 109-14.

[20] Gail Hamilton, "The Murder of Philip Spencer," Cosmopolitan Magazine, June 1889, p. 137.

[21] Ibid., July 1889, p. 248.

[22] R. C. R., "Reminiscences of Philip Spencer and the Brig 'Somers,'" United Service, July 1890, p. 28.

[23] Ibid., pp. 32-3.

[24] Alexander MacKenzie, "An Interesting Historical Letter," Magazine of American History, Feb. 1887, p. 130.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Newton Arvin, "A Note on the Background of Billy Budd," American Literature, 20 (1948), 55.

[27] Chase, p. xiv.

[28] Mushabac, p. 276.

[29] Freud, "On Narcissism," p. 90.

[30] Leyda, II, 689.

[31] Barron Freeman, "The Enigma of Melville's 'Daniel Orme,'" American Literature, 16 (1944), 211.

[32] William Braswell, "Melville's Billy Budd as 'An Inside Narrative,'" American Literature, 29 (1957), 144.

[33] Leyda, II, 832.

[34] Richard Harter Fogle, "Billy Budd: The Order of the Fall," 19-Century Fiction, 12 (1960), 194.

[35] Darrel Abel, "'Laurel Twined with Thorn:' The Theme of Melville's 'Timoleon,'" The Personalist, 41 (1960), 330.

[36] Leyda, I, 306.

[37] Ibid., II, 691.

[38] Joseph Wood Krutch, Five Masters (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1930), p. 165.

[39] Sachs, p. 51.

[40] Leyda, II, 794.

[41] Ibid., 829.

[42] Garner, "Fraud as Fact," p. 85.

[43] Ibid., p. 93.

[44] James Joyce, Ulysses (New York: Random House, 1946), p. 192.

Chapter VI

Captain Vere and John Claggart: The Moral of the Story

Solutions to the problems of Billy Budd begin to emerge when the literary history is examined, when its harbingers are traced through Melville's previous work, and when we see evidence of Melville's past heartbreaks erupting through its lines. But interpretations based on these insights are only partly satisfactory. Billy Budd is inextricably tied to a moral quest, and until the reader believes that he understands Melville's resolution of that quest the work will remain unclear. We are constrained to know whether or not Melville believed that Vere was right; we are compelled to seek out Melville's moral judgment.

Why is this need so urgently evoked by Billy Budd? All literary works, after all, have some moral weight, but we are often satisfied to close a book without having absolute resolutions of the problems posed. Billy Budd, however, demands more because Melville demands more; he calls attention to the problem. The trial scene, the point to which all events lead and from which all decisions emanate, is called "a moral dilemma" (p. 105). Vere is described as being in a situation that involves "the perils of moral responsibility" (p. 104). Claggart and

Budd function as moral opposites, as if they were figures in an allegory; indeed, Billy is called a "moral phenomenon" (p. 78). Their battle is a moral battle, one which demands judgment in terms of right and wrong, what Melville calls "the essential right and wrong involved in the matter . . . ."(p. 103). In Billy Budd Melville sets up clear-cut issues that cry out for clear-cut solutions.

When an author sets up a "moral dilemma," tells us of the "perils of moral responsibility," and creates figures that clearly embody opposing moral forces, he has made a tacit - indeed, almost an overt- commitment to offer answers to the problems posed. Active involvement in a struggle between right and wrong demands that a distinction be made between the poles erected, that a weighing of right and wrong be undertaken, and that finally the scales be read.

In the literary history of the work we have seen that Billy Budd, if it had been reviewed in its proper time, would probably have been understood as a story in which the central character chose the wrong alternative; Captain Vere would have been judged guilty of executing an innocent boy. In the foreshadowing of Billy Budd in Melville's other works, we saw that the characters who rely on their heartfelt feelings are those whom Melville admired, as are those who challenge sanity and life itself to see "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom."[1] Captain Vere does not fit either description. In the connection between Billy Budd

Malcolm Melville we have seen the possible reason for Billy Budd's often noted confusion and ambiguity. In this relationship we can claim for the author some sympathy toward Vere, even though Vere ultimately destroys Billy.

Those who perceive Captain Vere as Melville's villain have often tried to prove their notion by reference to an ironic tone they feel permeating this novella. Ironic tone and intention, however, are so elusive, so difficult to prove to those who resist the nuances of irony, that this tactic is often self-defeating. When Joseph Schiffman, the first who ventured into this arena, called Melville's final stage in Billy Budd "irony," he based his argument on Melville's "cool, detached pen, a seemingly impartial pen."[2] His analysis was too brief to be thoroughly convincing, but Lawrance Thompson's extended study, which followed two years later, marshaled better evidence.

It is useful to pause here and look into Thompson's argument to see if "tone" can be used decisively to explain Melville's meaning and to solve the puzzle of his moral judgment. Briefly, Thompson's argument is that "Melville has sarcastically and bitterly contrived the entire story of Billy Budd to illuminate his own reactionary interpretation of a Calvinistic text."[3] In Billy Budd, "Vere is responsible not only for Billy's action but also for Claggart's action; God is responsible not only for Adam's

action but also for Satan's action." The device Melville uses, according to Thompson, to demonstrate his "sinister allegorical meaning,"[4] is a narrator who is "just a wee bit stupid;" the narrator is used in an "interplay between the action itself" and the manner in which the narrator presents it.[5] The story is, therefore, read on three levels by three kinds of readers: the superficial reader, the orthodox reader looking for conventional moralizing, and the "elect," those seeing the intent of blasphemy.

In one example of how these levels work, Thompson points out that the narrator is partial to the military establishment in that he regards impressment as necessary, calling Billy's farewell to The Rights of Man a "terrible breach of naval decorum" (p. 49), and refers to the officers as "the more intelligent gentlemen" (p. 51). Therefore, the description of the impressment should be read as critical of impressment by Melville rather than accepting. But perhaps it would be simpler to regard the narrator as speaking with "tongue-in-cheek," and the reader would arrive more directly at the same conclusion. Furthermore, if the narrator supposedly takes "the part of the officers," how can we account for the following description of sailors: "but less often than with landsmen do their vices . . . partake of crookedness of heart, seeming less to proceed from viciousness than exuberance of vitality after long constraints: frank manifestations in accordance with natural

law" (p. 52).

Where, in another example, is the irony, the singleness of purpose, the multi-levels of meaning, in the description of the handsome sailor that opens the story: "With no perceptible trace of the vainglorious about him, rather with the offhanded affectedness of natural regality, he seemed to accept the spontaneous homage of his shipmates" (p. 43)? There seems to be only a direct and admiring description of a magnetic personality.

If the narrator is controlled by this "single thematic concern,"[6] that of anger at God as Thompson contends, then we have difficulty in accounting for his many lapses into clearly stated feelings, and into impassioned prose. The lines describing Billy's slumber before execution are quoted at length by Thompson:

> Without movement, he lay as in a trance, that adolescent expression previously noted as his taking on something akin to the look of a slumbering child in the cradle when the warm hearth-glow of the still chamber at night plays on the dimples that at whiles mysteriously form in the cheek, silently coming and going there. For now and then in the gyved one's trance a serene happy light born of some wandering reminiscence or dream would diffuse itself over his face, and then wane away only anew to return (pp. 119-20).

Thompson comments that "the narrator's tone is Christian; Melville's tone is the derisive, sardonic, sarcastic tone of disbelief and denial."[7] It seems to me that the effect of the passage is exactly the reverse.

The expression on Vere's face as he leaves the cabin after telling Billy the court's sentence is described as revealing "for the moment . . . the agony of the strong . . . a startling revelation" (p. 115). The word "agony" is a deeply felt word, incompatible with irony or sarcasm. Billy's hanging scene which Thompson uses to show Melville's method of saying one thing and meaning another is an affecting scene, so much so that it has often been quoted.

> Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn.
>
> In the pinioned figure arrived at the yard-end, to the wonder of all no motion was apparent, none save that created by the slow roll of the hull in moderate weather, so majestic in a great ship ponderously cannoned (p. 124).

It could be argued by the "ironists" that the last word is "cannoned," but the word "majestic" seems to be the controlling image. If the scene is "ironic," how can we explain the impact of the scene? The same could be said of Vere's death scene and the ballad that ends the story.

The scene in which the chaplain visits Billy in his last hours is useful here. Thompson regards the chaplain's kiss as the height of hypocrisy: "stooping over, he kissed on the fair cheek his fellow man, a felon in martial law, one whom though on the confines of death he could never convert to a dogma; nor for all that did he fear for his future" (p. 121). This is a moving moment, even though

the irony is apparent. The narrator then becomes angry and forthrightly says about having a religious functionary on a war ship: "he indirectly subserves the purpose attested by the cannon; because too he lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force" (p. 122). There is no "triple-talk," as Thompson terms it. Here, and in other parts of the story, the narrator speaks in a straightforward manner.

The voice of the narrator, therefore, is varied; he is sometimes ironic, sometimes emotional, sometimes angry, and sometimes direct. As befits a good storyteller, the narrator's voice is not consistent, but no doubt the lack of consistency also reflects Melville's struggle in Billy Budd between the events of the story and the intrusion of private disturbances which insist on making their presence felt. Lawrance Thompson is so perceptive in getting under the words of the story to the deeper meaning, makes so many telling, courageous, and even revolutionary judgments about Captain Vere in his 1952 study, that the reader is surprised at his failure to deal with the complexity of reference in the story as well as the affect of the words. Thompson is convincing in showing that Vere can be regarded as a "malignant God," but he is many other things as well; he is the voice of society, law, repression, tyranny, and the figure of a man who has stifled all his natural feelings.

Thompson's theory of the connection between Vere and Claggart is sound, however, and there is strong internal evidence to support the theory that Melville ultimately condemns both Vere and a universe in which a "momentary appearance of truth and goodness can exert no power on people or events that follow."[8] In Melville's unfolding of the relationship between the two officers on the Bellipotent the strongest evidence of Melville's moral judgment lies. This internal evidence lies in the words of the text as well as in the overall structure. D. H. Lawrence's admonition to trust the tale is sound, and the tale of Billy Budd offers sufficient evidence to understand Vere, and through Vere, to understand the tale.

Compared to Captain Vere, the figures of Budd and Claggart are of limited usefulness in solving the interpretive problem because they are presented as "types," and their actions are predicated, to a large extent, on those "types." Billy Budd is the Handsome Sailor," and Melville begins his description by citing this "type" of idealized sailor. Melville describes how the sailors would flank "some superior figure of their own class, moving along with them like Aldebaran among the lesser lights of his constellation. That signal object was the Handsome Sailor . . . " (p. 43). Melville continues to draw the analogy: "Such a cynosure, at least in aspect, and something such too in nature . . . was welkin-eyed Billy Budd" (p. 44). Claggart's

nature, his "type," is finally defined as one controlled by a "depravity according to nature." In order to explain the iniquity controlling the man, Melville resorts to describing a certain kind of individual. While Budd and Claggart are "real" characters as well, Melville's comparison of one to the "Handsome Sailor" and the other to those depraved "according to nature" allows him to line up the forces of good and evil in such a way as to forestall any possible confusion.

Billy Budd, whose "moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make" (p. 44), is instinctively loved by all, officers and men alike. He lacks that "intuitive knowledge of the bad which in natures not good or incompletely so foreruns experience" (p. 36). Claggart, a figure of "motiveless malignity," is referred to by Melville as the "direct reverse of a saint" (p. 74). He is the incarnation of evil whose antipathy to Budd is the instinctive reponse of total evil to total good. Budd and Claggart act as their natures dictate; a discussion of motivation or choice of action is, therefore, unnecessary. As Gordon points out, "Melville to some extent discourages us from searching behind these phenomena for psychological and social causes. We are apparently to regard the natures of Billy and Claggart as given, absolute, causeless."[9] Melville's arrangement of these antitheses is such that their behavior is not problematical, but serves to activate

the central problem.

Unlike the description of Budd and Claggart, the analysis of Captain Vere's nature is not illuminated by parallels with any recognizable "type," but is highly individualized. He is in no way a "typical" captain, but so different that on shore, in civilian garb, "scarce anyone would have taken him for a sailor" (p. 60). He would, at times, betray a "dreaminess of mood" (p. 61). Books are central to his existence, so much so that his fellow officers consider him a "dry and bookish gentleman" (p. 63). Even though Melville refers to Budd as "exceptional," as well as Vere, the exceptional in Budd is in belonging to an "exceptional" type of man, the "Handsome Sailor," while Vere is exceptional in that he is unique.

Captain Vere, consequently, can be considered the only character in the story, if by character we mean a person who has choices and is responsible for these choices, albeit with the usual limitations of freedom imposed by education, experience, and societal and biological imperatives. Understanding the "exceptional" in Captain Vere, therefore, is central to the tale. The fact that Vere's importance grew with each revision made by Melville makes manifest this assumption. Vere is as free as any man can be because, as the captain of a ship, he has absolute power. There are those who defend Vere by arguing that he has no choice; Billy Budd has killed an officer and, accor-

ding to military and naval law, must die. Melville, however, makes certain points which cannot be denied. He describes, in an apparent digression, an historical tale of resistance to tyranny, a mutiny, which did lead to reform, implying that injustice can be successfully resisted. C. B. Ives' study of the power of captains on a man-of-war states that "a captain of a man-of-war was godlike and might exercise his disciplinary discretion . . . with little expectation of reproof."[10] This is true, with few exceptions, of all Melville's fictional captains; they wield absolute power on their ships. Whether or not Melville was simply unaware of other choices, or whether he deliberately ignored other options is beyond our knowing. In the story, however, Vere himself states that there is a choice. He tells the drumhead court that "'one of two things must we do - condemn or let go!'" (p. 112). Melville has made himself clear; Vere is to be judged by the choice he makes and how he makes it.

Particular attention to the organization of the story is essential in understanding and evaluating the character of Vere on whom the interpretation of Melville's elusive tale finally depends. In his Aspects of the Novel, E. M. Forster makes the often quoted comment that the form in a novel satisfies our sense of the aesthetic.[11] Sometimes form can do more than please, however; it can conceal meaning, as Lesser contends,[12] but it can also reveal

meaning. Just as the frame of a painting forces our eyes to focus on the picture within the frame, so does verbal structure focus attention on certain aspects that the author wishes to reveal or to bring into sharper focus. This is particularly true of Billy Budd.

The structure of the first half of the story is one that apparently lacks complexity. Each character is paraded before the reader individually, his attributes are discussed, he is connected to the story which is about to unfold, and then the next character is introduced. This process is repeated for each major figure, beginning with the innocent Billy, then followed in order by Graveling, Nelson, and Vere, with the satanic figure of Claggart as the closing portrait. The importance of this mode of presentation can be determined by the inordinate amount of space allocated by Melville for its development. The rest of the story, comprising the action, the pretended mutiny, and the trial, is contained within the second half; therefore, more than one half of the narrative is set aside for the process of introduction, description, and reflection. Evidently we are to consider the characters and their relationship to each other every carefully before getting involved in the principal action of the story. Indeed, after Claggart, the last in Melville's list, is introduced, the following chapter begins with the idea of a play about to begin.

> Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage whereon to play its part. Down among the groundlings, among the beggars and rakers of the garbage, profound passion is enacted. And the circumstances that provoke it, however trivial or mean, are no measure of its power. In the present instance the stage is a scrubbed gun deck, and one of the external provocations a man-of-war's spilled soup (pp. 78-79).

The portraits that unfold in the first half of the narrative are not totally static. As we are told about aspects of the character, the figure begins to move into the story and some incidents take place to verify the described characteristics just given to us. Billy Budd is introduced as a "type" of the "Handsome Sailor;" he is impressed onto the Bellipotent while Captain Graveling continues his description, and the description is completed by the narrator. Captain Graveling's characteristics are discussed as the impressment is carried on and then Nelson is introduced to round out the picture of the Nore Mutiny. Captain Vere then emerges, followed by the description of Claggart, whose mysterious past is alluded to. Claggart's portrayal is momentarily suspended by the chapter in which Billy relates his troubles to the old sailor, the Dansker, who attributes the problems to Claggart's malice. Although the chapter appears to be a break in the discussion of Claggart's qualities, it is actually a continuation in that Billy's troubles are caused by Claggart. The action pauses again, more fully to described Claggart's depraved nature.

The effect is almost cinematographic, with the film stopping at a particular figure, then rolling on, stopping, then rolling on, until all the important characters are in view. While we see each character distinctly, as a separate entity, the very structure of the presentation urges the reader to contrast each figure with the ones immediately surrounding him. In effect, one person is being viewed in relation to another, in a gestalt. Additionally, the fact that one person first appears in proximity to another as the plot unfolds helps to determine the significant connection between these persons. Just as the surface plot reveals much about the individuals, there is a logic hidden in the combination of images (or persons) that are introduced. This hidden logic is clarified, made more apparent by the individual descriptions of the characters.

To be more specific, Billy Budd is constructed so that the reader, while apparently looking straight ahead at the character in focus, is made to consider past descriptions and comments relating to the other characters which are cleverly contained in the object at present in focus. Each sentence that carries us forward, also carries us backward in that each description echoes ideas and statement made about the immediately surrounding characters, echoes that urge the reader to see these resemblances and make the comparison unavoidable. Thus, although each character has an

independent existence, the comparison of each to the one preceding him and to the one following him effect a moral illumination. The structure that Melville employs to introduce the various characters thereby evolves into a moral hierarchy in which the value of each man is revealed by the order in which he is presented. By this order Melville makes his meaning evident.

The moral hierarchy becomes manifest when the reader realizes that Billy Budd is the first to be introduced and Claggart the last, the first an apogee of virtue, the last a grim nadir. The reader is then led in a slow, pointed descent from the extreme of goodness to the depths of evil. In order of their presentation and in descending order of their moral values, Graveling, Nelson, and Vere are brought forth for our examination, evaluation, and comparison, so that we are transported from the highest to the lowest by a series of gradual steps. Captain Vere and the other significant figures in the story can be judged by where in the story they are presented to the reader; by this means each character is assigned a moral identity. Their position in the hierarchy indicates how Melville values them.

This unfolding process in Billy Budd becomes a descent into darkness, a slow sliding into Hell. F. O. Matthiessen, in American Renaissance, observed a similar descending process in Redburn:

> Its [Redburn's] opening seven chapters . . . tak[ing] its boyish hero from his upstate village to the setting sail from New York, are more thematically arranged than anything Melville had heretofore attempted. The curve of each is a downward one from hope to despondence, as every new experience makes a sharper break with Redburn's previous fancies of the joy of life at sea.[13]

The two quotations from Pierre that follow represent a strategy of discovery that is repeated by the structure of the first half of Billy Budd, another "downward curve" to reach an ultimate truth.

> By vast pain we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid - and no body is there! - appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man! (p. 285).
>
> Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft (p. 289).

Melville discovers that the soul of a man, like the inside of a pyramid, is vacant; that the inner recesses of the human heart are black. At the end of the spiral staircase, in the innermost crevice of the pyramid, is the soulless man, the villain, the unexplained evil in all men. Bland, Claggart's predecessor in White Jacket, is described as "phrenologically . . . without a soul" (p. 188). Similarly, at the bottom of the moral hierarchy stands Claggart, the man without a soul whom we reach after descending through

Billy, Graveling, Nelson, and Vere. The inner core of reality, to Melville, was always evil, so that the use of a descending hierarchy was not totally new, but had appeared in more amorphous forms in previous works. These "descents" are a metaphor that Melville uses to depict the penetration of reality by the intellect.

The descent from the sunshine of Billy into the bleak world of Claggart is actually a restructuring of the image that persisted in Melville's imagination, that of the diver, the man willing to be carried down to the depths of the oceans to uncover the truth about man and the universe. What never changed for Melville was that the deeper the probe went into the heart of a man, the more horrendous was the revealed horror at the base. In some ways, the first half of Billy Budd can be regarded as an extended metaphor for the author's diving into the nature of man. Melville starts with the ideal in Billy, dives deeper and deeper through the more moderate figures until he reaches the bottom, his truth, the iniquity in man personified in Claggart.

A detailed analysis of the moral hierarchy begins with Billy Budd. The first to be introduced to the reader, heading the moral hierarchy with moral and physical attributes reflected in a "natural regality," a godlike figure with a face that the "Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules" (p. 51), he has a quality that

leaves no doubt that his unknown parents were of "noble descent." Sufficient attention has been paid to Billy as a Christ figure, as Adam before the Fall, to render unnecessary any additional comments on Billy's unquestionable position at the head of Melville's moral hierarchy. His virtue was such that all who came into his magic circle were profoundly affected.

Captain Graveling, introduced next, is a man of humane intelligence who "on a fair day with a fair wind and all goin well, a certain musical chime in his voice seemed to be the veritable unobstructed outcome of the innermost man" (p. 45). He is a natural man (always a positive for Melville) who allows his "innermost" being to be revealed and listens to this inner voice. In forgetting to offer Lt. Ratcliffe "customary hospitalities on an occasion as unwelcome to him" (p. 46), Graveling is shown as a man whose behavior does not rigidly follow forms, but one who responds spontaneously, naturally, to deeply felt feelings, a fact that will be recalled to the reader as he compares him to Captain Vere. Graveling's proximity to Billy in the moral hierarchy, depicted when he comments that Billy is "something like myself" (p. 47), is further emphasized when it is revealed that Billy's voice is "singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within" (p. 53). The reader is reminded that Graveling's voice also has a "certain musical chime" and expresses the "innermost man." Despite the

similarities between Billy and Graveling, Graveling, being wiser and more experienced, having lost Billy's pristine quality, is a step below Billy on the scale of virtue. Graveling, however, is above Admiral Nelson (who is to follow in the sequence of presentations) in the moral scale because Graveling is unworldly and simple, an honest soul close to natural man, an attribute that Melville consistently regarded as primary.

Melville's choice of the "natural" man over the civilized man is a constant throughout his life; the instances in early books, such as Typee and Omoo, have often been cited. This set of beliefs never faltered. In 1870, when Melville was fifty-one, he reacted to Emerson's essay "Illusions" by commenting, "True and admirable! Bravo! to 'This reality of simple virtues is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry, and art.'"[14] The same year, when reading Balzac's Eugenie Grandet, he underscored a sentence on the depraved society that Balzac describes, commenting ironically that "this describes man in his consummate flower of civilization."[15]

Graveling's position above Nelson on the moral scale is further assured by the fact that Graveling commanded a merchant ship, The Rights of Man, not a war ship, as did the the famous admiral. Graveling's function is a peaceful one, while Nelson's function is to destroy, to carry on war.

The next value on this continuum is presented in Ad-

miral Nelson, much extolled by Melville as a man "whose priestly motive led him to dress his person in the jeweled vouchers of his shining deeds" (p. 58). Nelson is presented after a description of the Nore Mutiny as a man who "vitalizes into . . . acts . . . exaltations of sentiment" (p. 58). The Navy transfers him to the ship that contains many disgruntled mutineers because "the force of his mere presence" (p. 59) would bring the men back into line. He did not have to "terrorize the crew into based subjection" (p. 59). These words will be recollected to affect our perception of Captain Vere who will finally dominate the court on the basis of fear, "terrorizing" the members of the court with the fear of a mutiny, although there are no signs that one is imminent.

Although the narrator does not draw any overt comparison between Vere and Nelson, two officers suggest that Vere "'is at bottom scarce a better seaman or fighter. But between you and me now, don't you think there is a queer streak of the pedantic running through him?'" (p. 63). The reader is thereby reminded to make the comparison between the famous admiral and Vere, and with the exciting description of Nelson as a daring and charasmatic leader, Vere's tepid personality must suffer by comparison. Merlin Bowen also observes an "implied comparison of Vere and Lord Nelson, commenting that the qualities attributed to this "greatest sailor since the world began," must of necessity

"bring the lesser man's own qualities, by the force of contrast, unavoidably to mind."[16]

It is of some significance that Melville was particularly uncertain as to where to insert the pages on Admiral Nelson. Hayford's and Sealt's notes on the genetic text demonstrate that he shifted them around until "evidently he withdrew it from the sequence and placed it in a separate folder"(p. 245). Then, according to Hayford and Sealts, "perhaps still weighing final inclusion, he passed on to revise the scene between Vere and the surgeon. That he did revise that scene shortly after revising the Nelson chapter" is quite certain (p. 246). This leads to a number of reasonable speculations, all of which tend to corroborate the image in Melville's mind of a moral hierarchy. He evidently connected Nelson and Vere mentally as he finally chose to place the pages on Nelson just before the description of Vere, according to the editors of the genetic text. He moved from thinking about Nelson, to revision of the scene between Vere and the surgeon, a scene which attempts to deal with Vere's behavior. This leads to the probable conclusion that Nelson, for Melville, served to illuminate Vere's character and, obviously not to his benefit.

As the downward trajectory of moral values continues, Captain Vere is presented, but only after Billy Budd, after the affectionate description of Graveling, and after the enthusiastic praise afforded to Nelson. Evidently Vere

lacks some of the qualities that the others possess. Unlike Graveling, Vere lacks the spontaneity to respond with his "innermost" being. Unlike Nelson, Vere is one of the "martial utilitarians" whose "personal prudence is no special virtue in a military man" (p. 58). When we are told that Vere has a civilian look, has an "unobstrusiveness of demeanor" we are reminded that Nelson delights in parading on deck in full splendor. When we are told that Vere is "intrepid to the verge of temerity, but never injudiciously so" (p. 60), Nelson, as the "reckless declarer of his person in fight" (p. 58) is brought to mind. In all of the comparisons that the reader is compelled to make by the structure of the story, Captain Vere emerges shrivelled in stature. Melville undoubtedly juxtaposed Vere and Nelson "for the purposes of comparison" as Willett, Withim, and Glick have clearly shown.[17]

Phil Withim points out that this comparison is not favorable to Vere and "if we look back to earlier descriptions, we find that they apparently contain an implied criticism." Each statement that describes Vere, Withim continues, is almost divided into two: the "second half of each statement could merely quality the virtue mentioned in the first half, or it could cancel the virtue completely."[18] Most of the statements that introduce Vere are "qualified," as Withim observes, but perhaps the phrase "tend to obscure" would explain the effect more accurately. Note especially

the words I have italicized:

> . . . the commissioned officers of a warship naturally take their tone from the commander, that is if he have that ascendancy of character that ought to be his (p. 60).
>
> . . . his advancement had not been altogether owing to influences connected with being allied to the higher nobility . . .(p. 60).
>
> But in fact this unobtrusiveness of demeanor may have proceeded from a certain unaffected modesty of manhood sometimes accompanying a resolute nature . . . (p. 60).
>
> . . . a modesty evinced at all times not calling for pronounced action, which shown in any rank of life suggests a virtue aristocratic in kind (p. 60).
>
> . . . one who whatever his sterling qualities was without any brilliant ones . . . (p. 61).
>
> . . . he would show more or less irascibility . . . (p. 61).

The word "qualification" that Withim uses implies modification, but Melville appears to be deliberately seeding our minds with doubts by implanting words that prevent us from seeing Vere clearly.[19] These equivocations become more pronounced with the words of praise that have described the previous characters still resounding, words that have neither qualifications nor equivocations.

This treatment of Vere does not stop with the introductory chapters; it continues relentlessly throughout the tale.

> . . . the Bellipotent 74 was occasionally em-

> ployed . . . for a scout . . . . This was not alone because of her sailing qualities . . . but quite as much, probably, that the character of her commander, it was thought, specially adapted him for any duty where under unforeseen difficulties a prompt initiative might have to be taken (p. 90).
>
> . . . his phraseology, now and then, was suggestive of the grounds whereon rested that imputation of a certain pedantry socially alleged against him by certain naval men (p. 109).
>
> . . . Captain Vere, a martinet, as some deemed him, was evidence of the necessity for unusual action implied in what he deemed to be temporarily the mood of his men (p. 128).

This is not Melville's first attempt at a technique that deliberately prevents the reader from arriving at any hard and fast opinion. In The Ironic Diagram, John Seelye points out that in Benito Cereno the "deceptiveness of events . . . is suggested by diction." He points to the frequency of words such as "seem," "appeared," "as if," "perhaps," "conjecture," etc. He claims that there are "115 conjectural expressions in a scant seventy-three pages. In the case of Benito Cereno the use of this type of diction may be "dictated by narrative mystery," but they also "reflect the lamination of false appearances and unanswerable paradoxes that confound perception and inquiry.[20]

The bottom of the moral spiral is reached with the description of John Claggart. More importantly, it is at this same point that Captain Vere's character crystallizes, where the uncertainties and the ambiguities evoked by

Vere's description begin to be clarified. Just as the reader compares Vere to the characters above him morally and finds little similarity, so the reader compares Vere to Claggart below him in the depths of iniquity and finds a richness of similarities. The work on the Billy Budd manuscript by Hayford and Sealts reveals that Melville, in the third stage of his reworking of the story brought Captain Vere into the foreground, although he simultaneously "continued to restate and rework the details of his already extensive analysis of Claggart" (p. 8); this suggests a diffusion of these characters in Melville's mind. Lawrance Thompson noted this when he described Claggart as "an agent of Vere . . . Claggart and Vere do indeed share the infamy and depravity."[21] Charles Mitchell calls Claggart "Vere's agent and double,"[22] further noting that Claggart and Vere are "patently linked . . . by function and similarity of character."[23] Just as Billy is Graveling's "peacemaker," Claggart serves Vere on board ship as master-at-arms, charged with the "duty of preserving order," a similar function to peacemaker except that one keeps order by using love as a weapon, while the other uses the authority of the law. If one is inclined towards mathematical equations, it could be said that Budd is to Graveling as Claggart is to Vere. Although Vere is presented between Nelson and Claggart, he is close on the heels of Claggart in the descent into Hell.

It may be helpful to take a moment to view this moral hierarchy in terms of Milton's scheme from Paradise Lost, keeping in mind the many noted references to that work in Billy Budd. If this model is used, Billy Budd and Graveling are the moral elite whose purity and innocence entitle them to places in heaven, although not quite on equal levels. Admiral Nelson, a great hero in Melville's eyes, is an example of the virtuous possibility of a great man here on earth who uses both head and heart. Claggart and Vere are on different levels, but both are in Hell, nevertheless, the place of iniquity. Claggart is the serpent in the Garden of Eden whose "first mesmeristic glance was one of serpent fascination" (p. 98). These references to him as satanic are frequently oblique but often quite direct as the one cited above. By calling Claggart the "man of sorrows," an allusion to Christ, Melville suggests a vestige of goodness in Claggart's evil, as if he were the archangel who fell but still bore some slight remnants of his higher origin. In some way the comparison of Claggart to Christ makes his evil more onerous. However this moral hierarchy is described, it exists in the story as powerful evidence of Melville's conceptual design.

The description of Claggart actually occurs in two parts, in separate chapters, the first similar to the manner in which the other characters are described. The initial

discussion of Claggart's character serves to prepare us for the more striking similarities between Claggart and Vere that will be revealed in the famous chapter in which Claggart is called a "depravity according to nature." Initially, Melville suggests that Claggart's social status is higher than would be ordinarily expected from a man of his rank; his facial features and his hands indicate that he is "not accustomed to hard toil" (p. 64). We remember that Vere also has family "allied to the higher nobility" (p. 60). We are also told that the master-at-arms' general "aspect and manner . . . suggest an education and career incongruous with his naval function" (p. 64). We remember that Vere is not a typical naval career man in that he is well read and thoughtful. He is also atypical physically in that out of uniform he cannot be recognized as being connected with a seafaring profession. We are then told that Claggart has a "constitutional sobriety" (p. 67) which also allies him to Vere who is described as quiet in demeanor and introspective.

These obvious points of congruency between Vere and Claggart hinted at by the descending moral coil prepare us for the essential in Melville's disclosure of Vere's true nature.[24] This revelation is culminated through the description of Claggart's depraved nature. Although Melville applies the characteristics of an evil human being to Claggart, they must be applied with equal justice to Captain

Vere. In attempting to explain Claggart's depths of iniquity, Melville makes use of a so-called Platonic definition of "depravity according to nature" (p. 75), with extreme specificity in his delineation of the type that bears this mark. Although Vere's qualities have been presented in an ambiguous manner, Claggart's qualities cannot be clearer, cannot be misunderstood; he is depraved "according to nature." The careful observer, however, having been sensitized by Melville's systematic descent from Budd to Claggart, perceives that the detailed description of those who are by nature depraved could be that of Vere as well as that of the master-at-arms, and it is the very clarity of Claggart's description that throws a singular light on Vere's character. The presentation of Claggart at the end of the moral hierarchy serves to effect the indirect analysis of Captain Vere, to make his "darkness visible." Indeed, in 1952 Leonard Caspar questioned, "Could Melville have written this with Vere's austere nature, doubtful sanity and cool judgment before him and have not intended Vere to be read into this description?"[25] In a very recent book, H. Bruce Franklin claims that the description that Melville gives of Claggart "frames a general definition which fits Captain Vere even more precisely."[26]

Each detail of the definition of "depravity according to nature" (and note the extraordinary minuteness of detailed definition in so short a fiction) results in the

illumination of Captain Vere's character. Melville begins by telling us that those who are depraved are "dominated by intellectuality" (p. 75), a characteristic true of both Vere and Claggart, as many critics have noted. Intellectuality also implies a submersion of the heart, a preference for the domination of the intellect over natural feelings. Vere tells the officers of the court to overcome their natural, heartfelt feelings: "'But the exceptional in the matter moves the heart within you. Even so too is mind moved. But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool" (p. 111). Claggart showed his heart briefly in his yearning toward Billy Budd, as if he "could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (p. 88), just as Vere admitted to the court that his heart had been "moved." Melville always felt that "barbarians with their instincts and warm hearts have sounder values than civilized men with their intricate intellects."[27] Most notable in a discussion of Billy Budd, we must recall that the book is dedicated to Jack Chase, Englishman, "Wherever that great heart may now be . . . ." The greatness of men can be measured by the size of their hearts and in this both Vere and Claggart are lacking.

Other similarities continue to emerge. Those who are depraved are "serious, but free from acerbity" (p. 76). Captain Vere is "grave in bearing" (p. 60), has "little appreciation of mere humor" (p. 60), and never falls into

the "jocosely familiar" (p. 63). Claggart is free from "acerbity;" Vere controls his "irascibility" (p. 61) when disturbed and never appears other than calm. Ralph Willett comments that "insufficient importance has been attached to Vere's irascibility, which Melville makes no attempt to hide."[28]

According to Melville, depravity folds "itself in the mantle of respectability" (p. 75), and Vere, characterized by an "unobtrusiveness of demeanor" (p. 60), is treated by his officers "with silent deference" (p. 60). Claggart, being depraved "according to nature," is "without vices or small sins" (p. 76). Vere has "sterling qualities without any brillaint ones" (p. 61). Claggart partook "nothing of the sordid or sensual" (p. 76); Vere had a "modesty that suggests a virtue aristocratic in kind" (p. 60). One of the aspects of depravity is that "civilization is auspicious to it" (p. 75), and as an urbane, intellectual man, Vere is the "civilized" man in the world of the Bellipotent. In an earlier discussion of Billy's virtue, Melville explains that virtue seems to be out of keeping with the "citified man" (p. 53), a term synonomous with "civilized" and characteristic of both Vere and Claggart.

Some of the characteristics of depravity delineated by Melville to portray Claggart could be used as an explanation for Vere's action against Budd. Melville says that in the depraved

> . . . even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law . . . That is to say: Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound (p. 76).

After Vere's "unwonted agitation" and "excited exclamations" immediately following Claggart's death (p. 102), his manner changes radically; his "even temper and discreet bearing" take over. He testifies "concisely," calmly, responds to questions with "that is thoughtfully put," and "I see your drift . . ." (p. 108). When he makes his opening statement he deliberates carefully before beginning, "mustering his thoughts" (p. 109), speaks, then, "he paused, earnestly studying them for a moment; then resumed" (p. 111). When he sense the officers' resistance to his argument he "then abruptly changes [es] his tone," before he goes on (p. 111). His self-control, manner, and words at the trial manifest the use of "a cool judgment sagacious and sound" to accomplish a malign deed. If this describes a "depravity according to nature," then Vere is depraved.

Another quality of this aberration of nature is that it is not "continuous, but occasional, evoked by some special object" (p. 76). According to the narrator of the story, Vere undergoes a change when Billy kills Claggart: "the father in him manifested towards Billy thus far in the scene was replaced by the military disciplinarian" (p. 100).

Lawrance Thompson suggests that "more precisely, Vere immediately reveals his true character."[29] Vere's determination to bring Billy Budd to trial instantly, despite the acceptable alternative of waiting, brings questions to the minds of the officers as to his sanity. The officers seem to think that "such a matter should be referred to the admiral" (p. 102). The surgeon questions whether "Captain Vere was suddenly affected in his mind" (p. 101) and further, whether he is "unhinged" (p. 102). Hayford and Sealts have pointed out that during the third phase of Melville's revision of his manuscript, the treatment of the surgeon's role changes which, in turn, "affects the whole interpretation of Captain Vere and his course of action," bringing Vere's behavior very much into question (p. 9).

In addition, Melville does not allow the questions of the officers to go without comment. Chapter XXI, immediately following, begins with an unresolved questioning of the line between sanity and insanity: "who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins?" (p. 102). He concludes by suggesting that judgment be made by "such light as this narrative may afford" (p. 102). The light the narrative ultimately affords is the execution of an innocent boy by a man who admits his innocence.

Billy's spontaneous reaction to Claggart's infamy was the "special object" that triggered Vere's irrationality,

that unlocked the depravity of his nature. Similarly, it was Budd's goodness that was the "special object" that brought Claggart's depraved malice into action. Charles Reich calls attention to the fact that "from the moment of Billy's impulsive blow we feel caught in a process of insane logic, that once under way, proceeds to it final conclusion despite the better judgment of all concerned." The law's insanity, like Claggart's "apparently subject to reason," is actually "deeply irrational."[30] This perceptive analysis can be extended to its logical conclusion, "proving" that Vere is irrational. If the law in Billy Budd is both personified and defended by Captain Vere, and the law is "irrational" because instead of protecting "man's highest aspirations against the savagery of nature"[31] it becomes the irrational destroyer of man, then Vere is irrational. If the law is depraved in its action and Vere is the law, then Vere is depraved.

There are two other clues appearing before the description of "depravity according to nature" which suggest or foreshadow Vere's outbreak of insanity or allude to its possibility. In describing Vere's conviction, the author reveals that Vere would maintain these conviction "as long as his intelligent part remained unimpaired" (p. 62). The use of the word "unimpaired" is somewhat strange, almost suggesting the possibility of his mind, in fact, becoming "unhinged." In addition, the conclusion of Chapter VII

says of men like Vere, who hold fast to principles, that "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. 63). Although apparently a rational being, Vere did things in a headlong manner, clinging to his long held convictions even when the occasion went beyond those convictions. The rigidity of Vere's notions blinded him; he did not see that he "had crossed a frontier" where those principles did not apply. Shurr concludes that Vere's superficial knowledge is a menace because his formulas "do not hold at all for the crises at the outer edge of experience."[32] In a like manner, Thoreau, in "Civil Disobedience," says that there are "those cases to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may."[33] Nelson went beyond prudence, recognizing that sometimes events demand that men go beyond "the outer edge." Vere was so frozen in principles that when those convictions were challenged by events, he crumbled.

Melville does not allow the implied parallels between Vere and Claggart to rest in the introductory half of the book, but occasionally reminds us of the comparison in the second half, albeit subtly. For example, just before Claggart approaches the captain to accuse Billy of being involved in a plan of mutiny, the narrator comments that Clag-

gart's "monomania" is "covered over by his self-contained and rational demeanor" (p. 90). Vere's actions during the trial scene can be described in similar terms. In another instance, the naval chronicles, which apparently overlook the part played by Captain Vere, report that "the enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal appear the greater in view of the character of the victim [Claggart], a middle-aged man respectable and discreet. . ." (p. 130). Vere is eminently respectable, careful in the extreme, so much so that earlier in the tale the narrator describes him as being easily taken for "some highly honorable discreet envoy" (p. 60). Perhaps Vere was not omitted from the naval chronicles after all.

Now that we are armed with an awareness of Vere's position in the moral hierarchy, and with the recognition that Vere can be called depraved "according to nature" by Melville's own definition, we have a more solid basis from which to judge Vere's actions. Captain Vere argues that he and his officers have abdicated their humanity when they signed on as part of the King's navy. Vere explains:

> 'How can we adjudge to . . . shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God and whom we feel to be so? . . . It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature: No, to the King . . . in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents' (p. 110).

Vere is attesting to the concept that the law is unnatural;

the law is against "Nature" but, nevertheless, he is pledged to the law. Vere has resigned his "conscience to the legislators" and has allowed his moral beliefs to be submerged beneath the weight of the law. Claggart's conscience is described earlier as "being but the lawyer to his will" (p. 80), which gives an obvious assessment of Melville's attitude toward the manipulation of the law for other than just causes.

Melville uses "buttons" as the symbol of the King's law, contrasting the insignificance or even absurdity of the buttons that represent law or governmental authority, with the greatness of Nature with a captial "N." In the earlier novels buttons as the symbol of authority was the object of gentle satire, as in White Jacket. A young sailor expresses embarrassment at having to face his brother who is an officer "with the anchor button!" White Jacket stands amazed and lectures his young friend:

> 'Why, Frank, this midshipman is your own brother, you say; now, do you really think that your own flesh and blood is going to give himself airs over you, simply because he sports brass buttons on his coat? Never believe it. If he does, he can be no brother, and ought to be hanged . . .' (p. 244).

In the same novel White Jacket claims lightheartedly that being on the quarter deck is a dangerous post. "The reason is that the officers of the highest rank are there stationed, a and the enemy have an ungentlemanly way of target-shooting at their buttons" (p. 65). In Billy Budd Melville chooses such a symbol to mock the idea it symbolizes just as he did

years before in White Jacket, but now Melville regards Vere's use of the "button" as a mark of just authority and obligation more critically; buttons do more than mock the symbol they stand for - they mock Vere's moral posture.

We no longer doubt how we are to react at Vere's vigorous and thoughtful foreswearing of any moral responsibility for his act.

> 'For suppose condemnation to follow these present preceedings. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For the law and rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this; that however pitilessly that law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it . . . it is not solely the heart that moves in you, but also the conscience, the private conscience. But tell me whether or not, occupying the position we do, private conscience should not yield to that imperial one formulated in the code under which alone we officially proceed?' (pp. 110-11).

He has argued that he is no longer a "natural free agent," that he is not "responsible," and that he has resigned his "private conscience" and his "heart." Vere fails to recognize that the law does not "operate;" only people do. It is no longer possible to read these lines without hearing the voices of the murderers at the Nuremberg Trials. Thoreau understood the danger in such a position, claiming that men who serve the state "with their heads . . . rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the Devil, without intending it, as God."[34]

Vere commits an additional offense when he seeks out the approval of others rather than accept responsibility for his

own decisions. Even the surface narration makes it apparent that the moment of Claggart's death is, for Vere, Billy's death. He calls Billy a "fated boy," and the angel that "must hang" (p. 101). He seeks out the other officers in a "mock" trial, not for their ideas or opinions, but because he needs their confirmation. Melville explains that Vere was far "from embracing opportunities for monopolizing to himself the perils of moral responsibility, none at least that would properly be referred to an official superior or shared with him by his official equals or even subordinates" (p. 104). The irony here is almost inescapable.

These citations show textual evidence that Melville paralleled Vere and Claggart in character and actions, either consciously or unconsciously. The weight of these textual citations is confirmed even further when the reader steps back for an overview of the story; he realizes that it is Billy who pulls things together, Claggart who attempts to throw the world of the Bellipotent into horror and confusion, and Vere who finishes the work so carefully begun by Claggart. In Book II of Paradise Lost Satan tells Chaos to "uncreate" the world, in effect to resurrect chaos. Billy is the direct opposite; it is he who brings unity, harmony, and love, while Claggart and Vere both uncreate the world that Billy has created.

Merlin Bowen comments that in the book's opposition of "civilization and nature, head and heart [Vere] stands with

Claggart and against Billy. By both temperament and training, he is much closer to the petty officer he despises than to the young foretopman he admires."[35] Werner Berthoff observes "how abruptly and entirely Claggart and what is embodied in him are dismissed from the story. After the trial he is barely mentioned again."[36] Berthoff, however, is only partly correct in his observation. Although Claggart is "dismissed from the story . . . what is embodied in him" remains in motion. It is as if at death Claggart's soul left his body and entered Captain Vere, a man whose nature would easily accommodate such a soul. The story is not ruptured because Vere picks up exactly where Claggart drops off. Vere is a continuation of Claggart, and therefore the disappearance of so central a character in the middle of the story does not disrupt the telling. Vere readily assumes Claggart's role because Claggart, in many ways, was a projection of forces in Vere's soul. Like Claggart, Vere recognizes "Billy's goodness but his desire to destroy it takes even more prudently obscure form than in Claggart."[37] Maud Bodkin explains that Faust, like Othello, is in the "grip of a devilish passion, he is impatient for the destruction of the thing he loves to be complete." Those in the grip of a "daemonic possession" pursue a "compulsive course."[38] There could be no better description of Vere's precipitous action after Claggart's death - absolute determination to destroy the thing he loves. Nothing can deter him from his murderous course of action.

Although Vere parallels Claggart in both character and actions, Melville introduces him somewhat above Claggart in the moral hierarchy because Vere participates not only in Claggart's nature, but in Billy's as well. Like Claggart, Vere "apprehended the good," but was "powerless to be it" (p. 78). The intensity of our reaction to Vere's act results from our recognition that implicit in the tie between Billy and Captain Vere is the possibility that for Vere, unlike for Claggart, there is a choice. When Vere executes Billy, when he denies the goodness in himself, he deals himself a moral blow. Thoreau wisely asks, "is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out and he bleeds to an everlasting death."[39] When Vere destroys Billy, he destroys the better part of his own being. His soul is vacant and death is simply the capping experience.

Captain Vere does not grasp his opportunity for greatness as does Timoleon, the hero of a poem Melville published in 1891. In Melville's reworking of this famous story, we can pick up additional clues as to his moral preoccupation at the time he was writing Billy Budd. Melville extols Timoleon as a man who courageously dares to do "one transcendent deed," "a deed of startling note" - the killing of a brother who brutally oppressed the people he ruled.[40] Although the tyrant was "legalized by lawyers," and his assassination was both a crime against the state as well as a fraticide, Timoleon did

what he felt morally compelled to do in the only way available to him. In so doing he broke the laws of society and state, "stare [d] down censorship and ban," but such a deed described by Melville in the poem is "a virtue beyond man's standard rate." Vere's action, in conforming to the law and custom, is a world away from Timoleon's in time and merit. Everything noble in Timoleon's act shrinks Vere's action to one of puny cowardice. Vere does not go beyond the ordinary, does not reach towards a virtue that society judges as a "strain forbid." If the poem "Timoleon" extols the heroism of the title figure, how can Captain Vere merit Melville's approbation for doing exactly the opposite? It is totally illogical to suggest that Melville can admire them both, particularly as he was involved in both works simultaneously. Because "Timoleon" obviously applauds the hero's action, we are compelled to recognize that Melville meant to be critical of Vere for rejecting the moral obligation that Timoleon painfully accepts.

In Billy Budd and "Timoleon," Melville explores another moral concern that is important to him. Melville sess that evil is often powerful, possessing a certain quality of initiative and strength that goodness often lacks. In "Timoleon" he questions whether goodness need always "lack the evil grip" and must "good in weak expire?" Melville has previously conceived of goodness as impotent, describing the moderate man in The Confidence Man as being capable of being used "for

wrong," but totally "useless for right." Melville earlier commented on Edmund's "infernal nature in King Lear, noting that this malevolent figure has a "valor often denied to innocence."[41] The quality of goodness continues to be fragile in Melville's perception, delicate and quickly smashed, as it is in Billy Budd.

Timoleon is a personification of the American ideal, the individual standing alone, apart from society, following the dictates of his conscience, the stirrings of his heart. Initially rejected by the community for his transcendent act, the growing awareness of the good he has done turns the public around; they call him back from exile and idolize him. But his deed is one that propels him beyond the need for society's approval. He does not return, not out of spite, but out of indifference to public acclaim and a growing cynicism toward toward public approval.

The period during which Melville was working on Billy Budd and "Timoleon" was the same; if he admired the hero of one, how could he not have abhorred the other? By examining "Timoleon" we can say that it is probable that Captain Vere was morally reprehensible to Melville. Vere's failure brings Billy Budd to its conclusion with the annihilation of goodness and innocence, not by the malevolent figure, but by the evil lying hidden in an ostensibly good man.

Billy Budd is a story that confronts some of the most profound and disturbing issues

the problem of good and evil; the balance between justice and injustice; the eternal schism of head and heart; the dichotomy between the law of man and higher laws; the corruption of war and the responsibility of office. While Melville's vision was essentially a dark one, he believed the actions of men to be supremely important, not because they can change the world, but because it is through the choices that men make that their lives have meaning. Many years before, the author of Moby-Dick chanted the praises of the men from Nantucket, chanted of men "led to think untraditionally and independently," of men formed for "noble tragedies" (p. 71). Many years later in Billy Budd, he is still able to conceive of a man who although far from a "mighty pageant creature" (p. 71) has the opportunity for a transcendent act, an opportunity to reject forms and conventions and embrace love and justice but who fails. In Billy Budd Melville reviews a lifetime of personal and public failures and damns Captain Vere, the man whom he has invested with so many of his characteristics and weaknesses.

For Billy Budd Melville ransacked his memories, opened up his painful past. Into this tale he poured all his ideas about the compelling issues that mankind cannot skirt. His conclusion is not a happy one. He found the corruption of

war and the true responsibility of office hiding behind "measured forms." He found man following the letter of the law rather than its spirit. He found evil triumphant and the heart subverted by the exultant head. So it seems peculiarly appropriate that this 1891 work was published in 1924, a time of disillusionment and hopelessness. But buoying up the despair in Billy Budd and making it a nineteenth-century work after all is an awareness that man, with all his weaknesses, is important enough so that when he fails, we have a sense of loss. What happens is significant; it has importance. Billy Budd, molded out of Melville's final moments, makes it so.

Notes

[1] Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 347.

[2] Schiffman, p. 132.

[3] Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 403.

[4] Ibid., p. 396.

[5] Ibid., pp. 359-60.

[6] Ibid., p. 414.

[7] Ibid., p. 404.

[8] Shurr, p. 259.

[9] Gordon, p. 125.

[10] Ives, p. 34.

[11] Forster, pp. 137-40.

[12] Lesser, p. 125.

[13] Matthiessen, p. 396.

[14] Leyda, II, 715.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Bowen, pp. 229-30.

[17] Glick, pp. 109-10 , Willett, pp. 372-73, and Withim, pp. 118-19.

[18] Withim, p. 118.

[19] Selsor and Edward M. Cifelli, "Billy Budd: 'Boggy Ground to Build on,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 13 (1976), 463-69. They both discuss at length Melville's deliberate attempt to make his meaning ambiguous.

[20] Seelye, p. 105.

[21] Thompson, p. 413.

[22] Mitchell, p. 119.

[23] Ibid., p. 122.

[24] Other studies have noted some of these similarities, but in much less detail. Additionally, this study illustrates Melville's method in leading the reader step by step so that the observation of these similarities is unavoidable.

[25] Caspar, p. 150.

[26] Franklin, p. 69.

[27] Withim, p. 150.

[28] Willett, p. 371.

[29] Thompson, pp. 385-86.

[30] Charles A. Reich, "The Tragedy of Justice in Billy Budd," Yale Review, 56 (1967), 386.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Shurr, p. 251.

[33] Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," in Reform Papers, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 68.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Bowen, p. 218.

[36] Berthoff, p. 201.

[37] Widmer, p. 28.

[38] Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination, (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1934), p. 228.

[39] Thoreau, p. 77.

[40] Herman Melville, Poems: Containing Battle-Pieces, John Marr and Other Sailors, Timoleon and Miscellaneous Poems (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963). pp. 247-53. All citations from this poem will be from this edition which is unlined.

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