

A Study on Melville's *Billy Budd*

by

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Herman Melville finished *Billy Budd* on April, 1891, five months before his death. It was almost forty years since he had written *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*, and *Pierre*. During the interval he wrote very little, and this story was to become his swan song. He began this in September, 1888, finished his first draft—a short story titled “Baby Budd, Sailor”—in six months, and spent another two years in re-writing and expanding it, until he finally wrote the words “End of Book” with the date, April 19, 1891. Whether he meant it for publication or not, it remained unnoticed until 1921 when Eleanor Melville Metcalf, a granddaughter of Melville's, opened the remains of Melville's papers, and Raymond W. Weaver, an early Melville scholar, after painstaking editing, collected this story in the series of Melville's works published in London. This first edition was far from complete; for, according to Alfred Kazin, “The manuscript is partly in pencil, partly in ink, and so illegible (Melville's quavery, unstable hand having become even more erratic in old age), so full of corrections and evident uncertainties, so confusingly paginated in several sets of numbers, that the original version of the novel, a short story entitled ‘Baby Budd, Sailor,’ was mixed in with the text.”⁽¹⁾

F. Barron Freeman of Harvard University re-investigated the manuscript, tried all variant readings, and put the result of his work into print in 1948. This edition contains, beside *Billy Budd, Foretopman*—Freeman retained the subtitle which was written on a small slip of paper—elaborate notes, “Baby Budd, Sailor,” and an invaluable introduction on textual problems and on more general matters concerning its background and sources.

At present the novel is easily accessible through several popular, paper-bound editions, most of which are based on Freeman's edition, but with some new improvement. As yet no definitive standard edition of *Billy Budd* has been made. However, Milton Stern in his notes of the edition of 1958 says: "Recently, Elizabeth Treeman of the Harvard University Press, completed a new collation of *Billy Budd* texts, working from the original manuscript; her edition probably will remain as the standard, authoritative version."⁽²⁾ Stern says he made many corrections in punctuation and wording. His edition is one of the most up-to-date.

The book which was so laborious a task is only a small one, a story of less than a hundred pages in print. It contains a preface and thirty-one short chapters. The main plot of the story is this: The time was 1797 just after the great mutinies in the British Navy. Billy Budd, a handsome young sailor on board a merchant ship, *Rights-of-Man*, was impressed by a British Navy ship, *Indomitable*. With his unpretentious, good looks and a sort of genial happy-go-lucky air, he was soon a favorite of the crew except for one Claggart, the Master-at-arms, who, by that very good looks and innocence of Billy's, conceived an inexplicable antipathy to him. Claggart secretly planned to destroy Billy. Billy was often troubled by unpleasant events, but it was beyond his nature to suspect that any hostility against him might exist on the ship. *Indomitable's* encounter with a French war-ship, which ended in unsuccessful pursuit, gave Claggart the chance to inform the captain of the ship, Vere, that Billy was inciting a mutinous spirit among the impressed men. Captain Vere did not know Billy well till that time, but, because of his innocent looks, it seemed to him that it was quite improbable for such a fellow to lead an intrigue. For fear lest he should excite useless suspicion on the ship, Vere sent for Billy to his cabin, where he ordered Claggart to repeat the charge. Billy was too astounded and shocked to know what to say in his own defence. When he was strained, he was apt to show a stuttering tendency. Vere perceived Billy's distress and tried to encourage him to speak. It added to Billy's torture. Without being able to utter a word, Billy struck

Claggart on the head. Claggart died on the spot. Vere instinctively understood that Billy was not guilty of mutiny. But out of his sense of duty as a war-time military captain, Vere summoned a drum-head court immediately. He insisted that Billy be hanged without delay. The officers were reluctant, but gave in. Next morning Billy was hanged on the main mast. At his last moment Billy exclaimed "God bless Captain Vere!" which was echoed by the crew. At his death Billy showed no convulsion—an unusual phenomenon in death by hanging. Soon after this incident, Vere was wounded in an encounter with a French ship, *Atheiste*, and died. His last words were "Billy Budd, Billy Budd." But in a naval document Billy was reported as a mutinous murderer, executed on board the ship, and Claggart as a noble officer of the King. Years afterwards, the crew of *Indomitable* still remembered Billy and used to sing a ballad of Billy, the beloved sailor who died innocent.

Concerning the material of the story and the source of inspiration for the author, Charles Anderson's article, "The Genesis of *Billy Budd*"⁽⁸⁾ has much to suggest. According to biographers, Melville's wife inherited a legacy from a relative in 1886, which enabled the author to retire from his job in the Custom House and to enjoy leisure for the first time in his life. The book was dedicated to Jack Chase, a British sailor, who had once been Melville's shipmate, and Melville's admiration for whom was "perhaps the happiest whole-hearted surrender he ever gave to any human being"⁽⁴⁾ as Weaver says. Anderson thinks that Melville was in a reminiscent mood when he wrote *Billy Budd*, and that Jack's memory might have prompted Melville to give his story a setting in British naval history. Then he gives some account of corresponding historical events in the British naval history, which was evidently available for Melville.

Anderson, then, gives a detailed account of the *Somers'* incident in 1842, which had special connection with the author. The date of *Somers'* incident comes nearly a half century after that of *Billy Budd*, but the incident is particularly akin to Billy's story. A Philip Spencer

and two of his fellows were arrested under suspicion of a mutinous plot on board an American war-ship, *Somers*. Though the evidence was not sufficient, they were put to death on board, because of the captain's strong desire to keep military authority. Incidentally, the informer was Lieutenant Gansevoort, a cousin of Melville's. The executed man, Spencer, was a son of the Honorable J. C. Spencer, Secretary of War under President Tyler, and the incident naturally attracted popular attention. It is probable, Anderson infers, that Melville had heard the details from his cousin and had seen a dramatic theme in it, though he kept it to himself for a long time for fear of offending his cousin. The Lieutenant died in 1888. Nearly half a century after the incident, the *American Magazine* took up this again by the title, "The Mutiny on the *Somers*." Next year, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* gave a fictionalized article, "The Murderer of Philip Spencer." Anderson concludes that these series of events might have given Melville the impetus to write this story.

Newton Arvin develops the research of the role of informer Lieutenant Gansevoort in the *Somers'* incident. He refers to the autobiography of Harriet A. Weed, an acquaintance of Gansevoort's. According to Weed, the fact that Gansevoort practically had caused the death of three youths seemed to have weighed on his conscience heavily. Arvin quotes from Weed, "I do know that a bright sensitive gentleman [Lieutenant Gansevoort] and a most promising officer of the navy, spent the best part of his life a prey to unavailing remorse for an act the responsibility of which belonged to a superior officer." Arvin adds that one of the executed was, like Billy, a favorite of the crew, and that he exclaimed at the moment he was run up to the yard arm, "God bless the Flag!" which suggests Billy's "God bless Captain Vere!"⁽⁵⁾

B. R. McElderry, Jr. throws a light from a different angle. He mentions two contemporary popular plays, *Black Eyed Susan* and *The Mutiny at the Nore* by D. W. Jerrold, one of which Melville might have seen on Broadway, and one novel, *The King's Own*. All these three works took up a theme of a sailor who, provoked by unjust treatment,

attacked a superior officer, was sentenced to death, and, in preparing to die, forgave his enemies. McElderry says that, if they had no direct connections with Melville, it is clear that the theme of *Billy Budd* was a popular one in his day.⁽⁶⁾ R. A. Gollin in his article, "Justice in an Earlier Treatment of the *Billy Budd* 'Theme'" supports McElderry, giving some further evidence.⁽⁷⁾ Thanks to these researches it has become clear that Melville, like Shakespeare, used old, familiar material of his day and one which must have been of poignant concern with him. It must have been to give it his own interpretation that he took up the theme.

Then, what is the meaning of the story, and what kind of interpretation did Melville give? These are questions to which no satisfactory answer has yet been given, and to which so many critics have given different answers. As to the symbolical meaning of the story, however, there are certain common factors through them. There is no doubt that Claggart is an evil, depraved being. The author likens his dead body to a snake. He is a symbol of evil, darkness, Satan and snake, the informer Judas Iscariot, and an intellectual, civilized modern man who has lost his innocence. Billy is the symbol of innocence. As there is a striking similarity between his hanging and the Crucifixion, he may be symbolizing Christ in a certain aspect, and his freedom from suspicion and dark thoughts suggests light as contrasted with Claggart's darkness. The author refers to his physical beauty as "that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor, in some instances gave to his heroic strong man,"⁽⁸⁾ and his nature is "little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company."⁽⁹⁾ So, he seems also to symbolize a primitive man, Adam before the Fall. So far, parallelism is quite obvious. As to Vere, however, critics show sharp difference of opinions. As 'Vere' suggests *vir* 'man' and *veritas* 'truth,' several critics think he is a symbol of humanity and justice. In Chapter 23, Melville says, "He was old enough to have been Billy's father. The austere devotee of military duty letting

himself melt back into what remains primaeval in our formalized humanity may in [the] end have caught 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."⁽¹⁰⁾ Some critics regard this as the replacement of Melville's Ishmael-theme with the Isaac-theme, and his final discovery of father and God. Biblical allusions are abundant throughout the story so that there is no mistaking Melville's deep consciousness of the Bible as the archetypal text of humanity. But biblical framework does not necessarily mean the biblical interpretation of orthodox Christianity. Some critics think that this framework conveys Melville's irony. To those who approve of ironic interpretation, Vere is the heartless agent of worldly laws or a weak-minded puppet who cannot but conform to them.

It is extremely difficult to cover and summarize varied interpretations of *Billy Budd*. One says that the story is "Melville's Testament of Acceptance,"⁽¹¹⁾ another says that it is not exactly an acceptance but forgiveness, and still another says it is Melville's weary acceptance without forgiveness. One says it is Melville's recognition of necessity, another says recognition of order. One says that Billy's story is a glorification of heroism and an anachronism, another says that it is a social allegory, that it glorifies socialistic idea, and still another asserts that Melville, a democrat in conviction, grieved over the defeat of democracy. One says that it is Melville's final attack on evil, and another says that it is a sarcastically contrived interpretation of Calvinistic text. When so many contradictory interpretations are possible for one story, it is proper to doubt if it is a successful work of art. Before going into detailed discussion, however, a passing remark on the change in *Billy Budd* criticism shall be given.

Roughly speaking, earlier critics of the story are almost unanimous in regarding the novel as Melville's reconciliation with God and with the world. John Freeman refers to the novel as Melville's "Paradise Regained" and his "Everlasting Yea" in his *Herman Melville* (New York, 1926). E. L. Grant Watson wrote an article, "Melville' Testament of

Acceptance." (*New England Quarterly* VI, 1933). Lewis Mumford's *Herman Melville* (New York, 1929), F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (London, New York, 1941), Charles Weir, Jr.'s article, "Malice Reconciled: A Note on Melville's *Billy Budd*," (*University of Toronto Quarterly* XIII, 1944) are written in the same vein. There are minor differences between them, but radically different opinions are mostly of those published around and after 1950.

There are several causes to explain the matter. 1) The growing enthusiasm for Melville's study in recent years which has been almost a boom and which has naturally resulted in an overwhelming number of Melville criticisms full of variety. 2) The growing influence of New Criticism, which opened up a way to elaborate analyses and subtle interpretations, giving critics new methods and tools of criticism. 3) Most important of all, the appearance of Freeman's edition which gave critics not only a better text but also the invaluable materials for them to have access to Melville's creative process. Harry Modean Cambell puts his basis of ironic interpretation on Melville's emendations of words.⁽¹²⁾ Karl E. Zinc takes a part of his grounds of ironic interpretation on Melville's expansion of the text.⁽¹³⁾ R. B. West, Jr. and Leonard Casper do not explicitly mention Melville's expansion, but their views depend in their most crucial point of discussion on the parts which Melville had added afterwards.⁽¹⁴⁾ Therefore, it is necessary to consider how Melville expanded the book though without going into detail of the emendation of the words.

"Baby Budd, Sailor" has no preface; several chapters in the middle and towards the end are absent. The preface is a brief account of the historical background of the story and quite an imposing one, which makes the reader expect a grand historical drama. After this preface, the whole story is rather an anticlimax. Chapter 4, titled "Concerning 'The greatest sailor since the world begun'—Tennyson?" is an added chapter. It tells about Admiral Nelson whom Melville pays tribute to, but with such a flowery, devious rhetoric that it is extremely hard to get his real intention. It is an entire digression from the main plot.

The chapters telling the events after Billy's execution are entirely missing in "Baby Budd, Sailor." They contain a conversation between the ship's surgeon and the purser, discussing Billy's death without convulsion. The purser wants to attribute some meaning to it, while the surgeon refuses to be involved in unscientific reasoning. They also contain the episode of Vere's death, of the naval report which says that Billy is a mutinous villain, and the ballad which the crew made and used to sing. "Baby Budd, Sailor" is a simple story without ambiguity. It is almost impossible to attribute any complicated, recondite meaning to it. These added chapters make it difficult to be sure of Melville's real intention.

Karl E. Zinc thinks the story is a social allegory. He mentions Melville's historical awareness. He regards Vere as a mouthpiece of old world's authority which Melville wants to attack. Billy is goodness itself untouched by the rigid "forms" of existing human society, and he is a victim of them. Zinc asserts how Melville added the chapters at the end lest readers should miss the irony, and says that the novel is the expression of Melville's grievance over the fact that "Civilization has come to compromise men's cherished natural integrity" (Zinc, p. 139), and his attack on "forms." Oliver Snyder's opinion is similar to Zinc's, but Snyder is more radical and he puts more emphasis on political meaning which he believes underlies the surface plot.⁽¹⁵⁾ While their interpretations point to one possibility, that is, one possible stratum of Melville's consciousness, they exclude other possibilities by overgeneralizing. They overlook all counter-evidence such as Vere's unquestionable nobility as a man, which is obvious in his characterization. They overlook also Melville's consideration on evil nature of man which is by no means so simple as to be soluble by mere social reforms.

Leonard Casper attacks Vere because he "assumes the attitude of free willed fatalism and self-determinism . . . in his acceptance of the death penalty. His decision is not to make a decision, but to hand down prejudgement; by limiting his free will, he makes the whole seem fated" (Casper, p. 151). He regards Billy's "God bless Captain Vere!"

not as acceptance of his fate but Christian forgiveness. He thinks that the true center of gravity is the ship's crew who "instinctively refused to believe Billy capable of mutiny or willful murder (despite all the 'reasons' given them)" (*Ibid.* p. 152) and cherished Billy's memory in their ballad. He says that the description of the Handsome Sailor in the opening passage pertains to Jack Chase rather than to Billy, and that Melville's ideal leader is not Vere but Nelson for whom the author spared a whole chapter. He asserts that Melville is not doing justice to Vere. Nelson alone was able "Not indeed to terrorize the crew into base subjection, but to win them, by the force of his mere presence, back to allegiance" (*Billy Budd*, p. 159, chap. 3).

Ray B. West, Jr. also regards the ballad as the key point of the novel. He thinks that this is not a tragedy but an allegory of a new myth. He says, "Christianity and all it implies has fallen into decay. The spirit exhales, but only momentarily, awaiting the propitious moment again to belly philosopher's sails. Billy's act of innocent heroism supplies the opportunity—creates the situation. Authoritarianism and a changing concept of man's individual worth had conspired to bring about the destruction of the old gods" (West, p. 126). According to his interpretation. Vere is a mouthpiece of a changing world's order and moral conceptions. West continues, "Billy's act (and by extension, Christ's) is seen more as tragic circumstance than as actual atonement. From Billy's act then springs the new myth, sung to the tune of a simple sailor's ballad. It is 'verse, popular verse' which bellies the sails, which supplies the common man with a means of confronting the facts, not only of Billy's death, but of his own. It is not orthodox Christianity. It is not popular science. It is the simple creative act which pierces the mask of falsehood and error, which sees man's existence as an heroic submission to fate, but which is in constant rebellion against those forms which result in man's injustice to man" (*Ibid.* p. 126).

According to Casper and West, Billy is not necessarily a tragic hero. The center of gravity is not on Vere. Their interpretation draws heavily upon the expanded chapters. It means that Melville either

changed his intention entirely after he had written "Baby Budd" or decided that he had not expressed his idea adequately in "Baby Budd." His expansion, in that case, has to be interpreted not as development but as a change or amendment.

Those who regard Vere as a symbol of humanity and justice think that Vere is, more or less, the center of gravity on which the essence of human drama — the dilemma of necessity and free-will — is played. Naturally, they identify Vere with the author to a certain extent either explicitly or implicitly. James E. Miller says, "Vere is Melville's maskless man, his man of forthrightness, and frankness, who by his balance of reason and emotion, mind and heart, recognizes evil and its inevitability on earth, comes to honorable terms with it, and endures albeit with a heightened tragic vision."⁽¹⁶⁾ On the whole, Miller's argument is sound and convincing. One may sense the critic's own firm stand as a humanist. Nevertheless, there is little trace of the imposition of the critic's own idea or preoccupation. One recognizes at once that this article is written by a person who was moved and inspired by *Billy Budd*. This kernel of genuine inspiration makes the article persuasive.

In spite of all the ironic interpretations it is only fair to say that Vere's characterization is done favorably throughout. What Miller left unsaid, however, is that Melville is not without a touch of patronizing humor on Vere's overseriousness :

. . . not only did the Captain's discourse never fall into the jocosely familiar, but in illustrating any point touching the stirring personages and events of the time he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity [as] he would [to] cite from the moderns. He seemed unmindful of the circumstance that to his bluff company such remote allusions however pertinent they might really be were altogether alien to men whose reading was mainly confined to the journals. But considerateness in such matters is not easy to natures constituted like Captain Vere's. Their honesty prescribes to them directness, sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier. (*Billy Budd*, pp. 165-166, chap. 7)

While Melville seems to look on Vere with much affection, there is no impassioned tone perceptible. The author's detachment or his intention

to stay detached is obvious enough. His detachment, however, can never be said sarcastic if one reads *Billy Budd* without any preconception about Melville or preoccupation of one's own. William Braswell's remark, "The implication appears to be that Melville himself does not condemn Vere,"⁽¹⁷⁾ seems more than justifiable. To regard the novel as an entire irony—as Lawrence Thompson did⁽¹⁸⁾—is going a little too far. One may safely say, however, that there are some ambiguous points which make it difficult to regard the novel as an entire acceptance or reconciliation. And these ambiguities are not implicit in the characterization of Vere but in the added chapters.

While Vere is the point of acceptance-irony controversy, Billy attracts less attention of the controversial criticism. But Billy's personality is not so single and clear-cut as one may suppose from the surface plot.

The book is dedicated to Jack Chase, Melville's former shipmate. According to Melville's biographers, Jack was loved by all seamen, and even superior officers showed admiration and respect for him. As Casper has pointed out, Billy can never be identified with Jack Chase. Billy's innocence is that of a child's and if everybody except Claggart loves him, the nature of their love is often half pity and not whole-hearted admiration. Billy's innocence is not the kind of innocence which has been tried and has survived.

The Handsome Sailor described in the opening passage, again, can not be identified with Billy. The Handsome Sailor has less to do with Billy than the reader naturally expects. The only unquestionable similarity between the Handsome Sailor and Billy is that they are both extremely handsome in physical aspect.

Melville himself does not try to give Billy virtues and weaknesses of more than ordinary good-natured persons.⁽¹⁹⁾ Though Billy is happy-go-lucky, he is not exactly free.

No wonder then that a young fellow of Billy's disposition was well content in such society. Giving no cause of offence to anybody, he was always alert at a call. So in the merchant service it had been with him. But

now such punctiliousness in duty was shown that his topmates would sometimes good-naturedly laugh at him for it. This heightened alacrity had its cause, namely the impression made upon him by the first formal gangway-punishment he had ever witnessed, which befell the day following his impressment. . . . 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 to bury himself in the crowd, Billy was horrified. He resolved that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof. (*Billy Budd*, pp. 174-175, chap. 9)

Leon Howard says in his biographical study of Melville, "He attributed to his hero, Billy, his own horror at the practice of flogging, his own meticulous efforts to avoid so much as a reprimand, and his own imagined desparation at the prospect of unjust punishment."⁽²⁰⁾ Considering Melville's experience in a man-of-war world and his sensitivity, Howard's assumption is well grounded. This passage makes Billy's image very vivid and human. Nevertheless, one has to say that Billy's innocence is not without flaw. He knows apprehension—the incipient knowledge of the world.

When Billy perceives something unpleasant present on the ship, he goes to Dansker—the terse philosopher on the deck—for advise. Dansker warns Billy of the iniquity of Claggart. Billy refuses to believe it. Theoretically, it means that Billy thinks he knows better. However simple, Billy has his own view of life. He wants to keep it. He does not want to see things which do not suit him. Next day, Claggart speaks to Billy in a pleasant manner. Then Billy exclaims, "There now, who says that *Jemmy Legs* is down on me!" (*Billy Budd*, p. 181) This incident shows that Billy had not exactly been free from suspicion. Billy goes to Dansker again; Dansker repeats the warning. Billy does not understand Dansker nor could he have done anything had he understood. Billy lacks imagination. He is obstinately a child. He wants to see the world as he wishes it to be. He can hardly be free from the guilt of avoiding reality, if one regards him as an independent individual at all, not as a handicapped being such as a very

young child. He is morally responsible for his constant repression of his suspicion by his wishful thinking.

Richard Chase says, "*Billy Budd* . . . has generally been praised for qualities it does not possess."⁽²¹⁾ He regards the theme of *Billy Budd* as "castration and cannibalism, the ritual murder and eating of the Host" (Chase: *Herman Melville*, p. 269). Much influence of Freudian psychology is discernible in his interpretation. Vere is a father symbol, who feeds on Billy. In a man-of-war world law feeds upon man—its own vitality. Chase concludes that Melville himself is the devourer of his own childhood, for, Melville, pitying his own childhood image, created a story of Billy, which, hindered by his self-indulgence, failed to become a successful work of art. His interpretation often looks far-fetched because his logic is not always very plain. Nevertheless, there is no mistaking he has an extraordinary insight into human psychology. He points out Billy's passive attitude towards the world, which is by no means the necessary quality for true innocence. Chase says, "This is a mechanism for keeping himself from admitting his own guilt and his own destructiveness" (*Ibid.* p. 270). This is convincing. How else can one understand Billy's reaction when he was unjustly charged by Claggart? Billy reacted with rage just like a child does when threatened. The truly innocent will react with wonder. Adam in Paradise might have wondered, if the snake told him an outright lie, what a strange creature a snake was. Again, if Billy were Christ, he would have kept silent with the saddest, kindest look towards Claggart. Billy's reaction is only too human, no more and no less. As the author refers to Billy as "a child-man" and also "a sort of upright barbarian," both his goodness and his weaknesses are those of a child. This world is not a good place for a child-man to live in. Billy got along well, because he could turn his weaknesses to strength by exerting his child-man-barbarian charm on his fellow shipmates. Billy exerts his charm on Vere and on the reader, too. Inasmuch as the reader cannot help feeling compassion with Billy, Melville succeeded in creating a tragedy of innocence. But, to regard Billy as pure goodness, as so many critics have done,

is to misunderstand Melville.

Another point which few critics have stopped to think is that what Billy had done was man-slaughter however unintentional. Moreover, his being unintentional is poor excuse for the act, because it is Billy himself who struck Claggart violently. The sole excuse for the act is Claggart's utter maliciousness as well as Billy's oral defect. Billy's reaction is barbarous though humanly natural. That is to say, untrained human nature is ninety per cent barbarous with ten per cent of human pride, human reason and human respect for other humanity. Billy took his responsibility like a man and accepted his fate. Through his attitude to take his own responsibility Billy proved his human dignity and persuaded the reader to feel compassion for him. Not until then, Billy had been quite human. Those who regard Billy as pure goodness are as good as saying that we human beings are born naturally good and can live happy-go-lucky until the monster Claggart comes to plunge us into the world of sin. Billy took responsibility. If he had not, he would never have aroused compassion in the reader's heart. Billy could take responsibility because man-slaughter was a tremendous guilt and even more because there was Vere to help Billy to understand the right way to take responsibility. Owing to Vere's help Billy could stay innocent and uncorrupted to the last moment. The reader's compassion is for Billy's helplessness—his helpless innocence—and not for his freedom from guilt.

There is no equivocal tone in the characterization of Billy. Billy is as helpless to the ways of the world as Adam before the Fall might have been, as afraid of punishment and as sensitive to iniquity as any ordinary balanced human beings are, and as lazy to think and brood and solve the problem as any happy-go-lucky boys are. He is portrayed real and convincing. As in the case of Vere, the author's detachment in the characterization of Billy is obvious, and his pitying affection for Billy is as obvious. The author does not seem to be justifying Billy nor does he idealize this "child-man." One may feel the author's sad smile from behind the pages. This is why some critic regards the novel as the

sign of old Melville's weary acceptance of the world order. R. B. West's remark, "Billy's act is seen more as tragic circumstance than as actual atonement," summarizes the matter well. Billy's fate is tragic, it is true, but the easy nature of Billy's innocence deprives the tragedy of its depth. In fact Billy does not have any extraordinary quality. There is no poetic exaggeration in the characterization of Billy which one may expect in an allegorical story. One need not suspend "disbelief." One reads the novel without least resistance but feels mystified, after reading through, as to the real intention of the author.

If the author is not willing to betray his partiality either toward Vere or toward Billy, one may doubt if Melville, like a true dramatic creator, remains, "indifferent, paring his fingernails" as Joyce said in his *Portrait of an Artist*. The answer lies in the characterization of Claggart.

The striking difference in the characterization of Claggart from those of Billy and Vere is that, while Vere and Billy are given both goodnesses and weaknesses of ordinary humanity, Claggart is from the first represented as pure evil. He does not have a fraction of human goodness and good-naturedness. At the heading of Chapter 13, the author says, "Pale ire, envy and despair," reminding the reader of Milton's Satan. The portrait of Claggart is drawn powerfully, and, indeed, beautifully.

His brow of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect; silken jet curls partly clustering over it, making a foil to the pallor below, a pallor tinged with a faint shade of amber akin to the hue of time-tinted marbles of old. This complexion, singularly contrasting with the red or deeply bronzed visage of the sailors, and in part the result of his official seclusion from the sunlight, though it was not exactly displeasing, nevertheless seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood. (*Billy Budd*, p. 168, chap. 8)

Many critics point out the suggestiveness of the above description, e. g. "pallor," "amber," "marble," suggesting lifelessness, "seclusion from sunlight" suggesting his infernal origin, etc. It is generally admitted that Melville did well in portraying Claggart. Claggart takes a vivid image in the mind of the reader in spite of Claggart's obvious unnaturalness

as a human being. The point is, however, that he is an image, a visual image, a portrait elaborately drawn on a two-dimensioned canvas but not a living, breathing, moving creature in a three-dimensioned sphere.

First, the author describes Claggart's outward appearance. Then, he proceeds to explain his peculiar personality. Claggart has no material ground for conceiving antipathy to Billy. His antipathy transcends cause-and-effect kind of logic. It is "spontaneous and profound," and therefore "mysterious." To comprehend Claggart "by a normal nature," the author says, "To pass from a normal nature to him one must cross 'the deadly space between'." He continues, "And this is best done by indirection" (*Billy Budd*, p. 184, chap. 11). Then, Melville refers to an anecdote concerning a mysterious character. The reference is truly indirect. A man talks about X—: ". . . I think that to try and get into X—, enter his labyrinth and get out again, without a clue derived from some source other than what is known as *knowledge of the world* — that were hardly possible, at least for me," and "I am not certain whether to know the world and to know human nature be not two distinct branches of knowledge, which while they may co-exist in the same heart, yet either may exist with little or nothing of the other." Then, the author makes his point clearer. He calls the evil quality of Claggart's kind as "Natural Depravity," and says "A definition which though savoring of Calvinism, by no means involves Calvin's dogma as to total mankind. Evidently its intent makes it applicable but to individuals. Not many are the examples of this depravity which the gallows and jail supply."

To understand the intent of the above quoted passages one has only to think of Emerson, Melville's contemporary, for whom the knowledge of the world and the knowledge of human nature are one and identical. Emerson appealed to his contemporary minds greatly. Then it is not difficult to guess why Melville is so carefully, painstakingly developing an essay on "abnormal" nature. The intellectual climate of Melville's day was not ready to believe in the reality of Claggart

other than a product of poetic imagination. Melville continues his discourse on "natural Depravity," but, instead of describing how those abnormal persons behave, he tries to define, analyze and put into categories. What he does is only to suggest and hint that Claggart also belongs to the human world though abnormal and exceptional. The hint is indirect, and actual Claggart is left out from the discourse.

After defining the peculiarity of Claggart's character largely through indirect hint, the author proceeds to hint Claggart's intrigue to destroy Billy. The author skips over Claggart's action entirely. The reader is not allowed to know how he is carrying out his planned intrigue. The existence of his intrigue is indicated only by a few circumstantial evidences. This is extremely puzzling. There are certain circumstances in which mere hints suffice. For instance, the author does not tell what Vere said and how Billy responded at their last meeting before Billy's execution. But the reader is already familiar with Vere's affection for Billy and Billy's trusting, open-hearted nature. From the author's hint, the reader imagines a touching, heart-rending scene and, thus prepared, accepts Billy's "God bless Captain Vere!" with little doubt. The author's skipping over Claggart's action, however, is a totally different matter. The reader has been tantalized by the indirect hints. The reader's curiosity has been sufficiently aroused. If one is interested in the evil nature, one would naturally want to know how an evil, cunning creature conjures up magic for gullible minds. Without being shown what he does, how can one believe in Claggart's reality?

Even more strange is the abruptness with which Claggart informs Vere of Billy's mutiny. Claggart is supposed to be intellectual and cunning. He is not supposed to do anything foolish. But the author presents nothing to prove his intellect. Vere does not believe him. All officers of the drum-head court try to defend Billy as it turns out. No hint of probable success of Claggart's intrigue is given. One may wonder what Claggart was going to say if Billy could only speak and defend himself. Billy's knock-down strike is a surprise to the reader as it must have been to Claggart if only he had stayed to feel it.

Billy's rash action crashes the reader's hope of knowing more of Claggart.

So far as the characterization of Claggart is concerned, Melville disappoints the reader. R. P. Blackmur's comment on Melville's craft in general fits very well to Claggart's characterization. Blackmur says, "To put it sharply, he did not write of characters in action; he employed the shells of stock characters, heightened or resounding only by the eloquence of the author's voice, to witness, to illustrate, decorate, and often as it happened to impede and stultify an idea in motion."⁽²⁾ The characterization of Vere and Billy, however, does not seem to suffer the same weakness. Though the impression which Vere and Billy makes on the reader's mind is not very deep, they remain in his heart unobtrusively human. On the other hand, Claggart's image impresses the reader with thrilling intensity, but it stays as a mysterious, abrupt, discontinuous source of threat, an ill omen, which does not quite embody itself into human form.

Whatever allowance one may make for the artist's originality of approach, it must be admitted that *Billy Budd* is extremely unevenly written. What caused this unevenness? If Melville betrayed his characteristic weakness in the characterization of Claggart, as Blackmur defines, why was he freer from the same weakness in the characterization of Vere and Billy? In order to answer this question, one has only to think of Melville at the height of his creative career. Melville had never been a writer of artistic finish. At his best his novels were never free from unevenness. The sheer strength of the central integrating spirit of the creator, however, made up all his weaknesses. It is not the faultlessness which distinguishes great works of art. It is truth. It is beauty. Truth and beauty come of their own accord when the artist works, with sincerity and discrimination, on his own ground, regardless of his age, experience and knowledge. Melville at *Billy Budd* writes with an air of "Menschenkenner." He is at home with Vere's disposition and Billy's, too. But he is not at home with Claggart's. This fact is all-too obvious in his indirect way of explaining Claggart's personality, or in his skipping over of Claggart's action. But, was

Melville at home with the disposition of *Moby Dick*? The description of outward appearance of Claggart is as powerful as that of *Moby Dick*. But Melville is trying to keep his "Menschenkenner" stand in the explanation of Claggart's personality. This simply does not work. Old Melville is more experienced, has more knowledge of human nature, and is more of a "Menschenkenner" than before, but balanced knowledge of human nature had never been Melville's characteristic strength. In fact Melville can never be a "Menschenkenner." His saying that "I am not certain whether to know the world and to know human nature be not two distinct branches of knowledge" indicates old Melville's sense of wonder and even bewilderment which never grew old.

To all circumstance it seems that Melville originally planned the story of *Billy Budd* as a drama of two opposing elements. While the idea of the natural goodness embodied itself into Billy who was by no means angelic but a vulnerable human being, the natural depravity remained as a flat character to the last without coming out of the two dimensioned canvas picture. As Richard Chase says, the creation of Billy may indicate old Melville's self-indulgence. Melville may have attributed his goodness idea to his childhood image, which he was too honest to idealize beyond conceivable reality. The natural depravity, however, he could not quite embody. He killed it prematurely before it began to live. Yet it did damage. It was a threat, a mysterious power, an object of fear, wonder and curiosity, rather than a concrete existence.

One must take into consideration, however, that it is doubtful if the novel was actually completed. "End of Book" does not necessarily mean completion, still less the author's intention of publication. It is certain that Melville wanted to say something and took great pains, but nobody is sure what it was which he wanted to say. Is it the depth of knowledge of human nature, which he had been amassing during the period of his silence and which the sadder and wiser Melville was more qualified to impart than in his younger days? If so, he succeeded in doing it in the characterization of Vere and Billy, though his knowledge

failed him in the characterization of Claggart. Or, is it Claggart, that mysterious evil spirit, which challenged Melville's creative impulse but which old Melville could not quite pursue with the energy which had distinguished younger Melville so remarkably ?

If one tries to fathom Melville's real intention in creating *Billy Budd*, all different interpretations begin to appear plausible. The author's attitude toward Vere seems to justify the "acceptance" interpretation, while the helpless, innocent boy's execution inspires a sense of chagrin which can be interpreted as a sign of Melville's resentment. The contrast of Billy and Claggart quite justifies the interpretation that the author is criticizing Modern civilization, its artificiality, intellectuality and depravity. One may even go so far as to assume that each critic contributed to discover one or more strata of Melville's consciousness from a different angle. The present question, however, is not what Melville intended but what he actually did. The question is a matter of aesthetic evaluation as well as of interpretation.

The main characters of the drama are unquestionably the three, Billy, Claggart and Vere. But there are minor characters such as Dan-sker, the officers of the drum-head court, the purser, the surgeon, etc., who have to be taken into consideration. The novel is also full of digressions and episodes, which baffle criticism. Criticism should deal with a work of art as a whole, not as pieces of dissected body. The difficulty of *Billy Budd* criticism, however, lies in the very impossibility of dealing with all parts without making some assumption or other to integrate the idea and to put it into a meaningful and consistent whole. In other words, Melville's use of digressions and episodes are often so equivocal that, if one is afraid of imposing one's own view of life on *Billy Budd*, one has to stop trying interpretation at all. As was mentioned already, while earlier critics who were more impressionistic than analytic showed only minor differences of opinion on *Billy Budd*, radically different opinions are mostly presented by recent analytic critics. Analysis can never be wholly objective in the field of literary criticism. Indeed, without an impression and assumption, literary

analysis never knows where to get started. Therefore, there is no reason to put more trust to analytical criticism than to impressionistic criticism. The analytic critics, however, have dealt with minor characters, the author's digressions and episodes more than impressionistic critics have done. Accordingly, those analytic critics have contributed much to deal with the novel as a whole.

What those analytic critics have done, however, has often only negative meaning. For instance, concerning the author's discourse on Admiral Nelson, they say all different things. Some say that the chapter is intended to illustrate Vere's drama. This is a view which the "acceptance"-minded critics generally support. But one says that the chapter is intended to indicate the difference between Nelson who is really great and Vere who is only a mouthpiece of worldly authority. Another says, "Melville anticipates the quality of Billy's death by investing Nelson, at the moment of *his* 'most glorious death,' with 'a priestly motive,' which led him to adorn himself as 'for the altar and the sacrifice.'"⁽²³⁾

The last analysis may impress one as plausible, but it must be added that the above quoted passages or words from *Billy Budd* are almost the sole ground of this interpretation, that the parallel between Nelson and Billy in this chapter is so meagre as to be overlooked very easily. The author announces at the beginning of the chapter that he is going to digress just for his pleasure's sake. The preceding chapter (chap. 3) and the following one (chap. 5) contain the discourse of mutiny. Vere has not been introduced yet. In Chapter 6, he is first introduced into the scene. The reader gets the hint of the dangerous situation in which Vere is placed as a captain, and may identify Nelson's situation with Vere's. In fact, Nelson story is effective for an underplot neither of Billy nor of Vere. Brilliant analyses of the chapter which are too full of variety only prove that it is not very successful so far as effectiveness is concerned.

The same can be said of the added chapters at the end of the novel. As was repeatedly mentioned, they are the main source of controversial

interpretations. Without those chapters, the novel is a relatively simple tragic story, in which the execution of Billy forms the climax. The reader may interpret the meaning according to his own imagination as it is natural for any novel. By adding those chapters, however, Melville seems to be trying to say something in order to channel the reader's imagination into a certain direction, though the result is to the contrary.

Among many different interpretations, R. B. West's is the most logical as well as brilliant one. A passing remark on his article has already been given. He thinks that Melville created a new myth by Billy's story. Billy's life and death became the source of inspiration for common men just as Christ's had been. The ballad which comes at the end of the book signifies "Melville's final expression of faith in mankind," that is, "verse, popular verse" which is "the simple creative act which pierces the mask of falsehood and error, which sees man's existence as an heroic submission to fate, but which is in constant rebellion against those forms which result in man's injustice to man."

In a sense West's interpretation covers and adjusts the acceptance-or-irony controversy by regarding Billy a victim of worldly "forms" and yet recognizing ultimately positive attitude of the author. According to West, Vere is not necessarily a cruel agent of the worldly authority, but nevertheless he represents the worldly order and one which is not free from historical relativity. Thus, Melville's adding the preface is explained. The conversation between the surgeon—a scientific man—and the purser—a superstitious man, a man of inverted religiosity—illustrates two opposing attitudes which the author wants to criticize and to suggest an answer in the last ballad chapter. Vere's suppression of the crew's disquietude immediately after the execution into the military discipline and his death—brought about symbolically by "Atheiste"—are logically consistent to West's line of reasoning. Also, the author's detached tone in describing Vere and Billy is explained.

Though West's interpretation is logically faultless, the question is whether *Billy Budd* can be regarded as a successful work of art if it

needs such a brilliant interpreter as West in order to be rightly understood. West's interpretation is founded entirely on the final version of *Billy Budd*. "Baby Budd" is left out of his consideration. *Billy Budd*, however, is founded on "Baby Budd." In the main part of the drama, "Baby Budd" is retained too much to regard that the two are entirely different stories. West's interpretation does not pertain to "Baby Budd." It is extremely difficult for the common reader to get the meaning West explained so brilliantly, that is, for the reader to deduce the meaning from the general impression he has gathered from his mere perusal.

Melville spent two years on this short novel. To all circumstances it seems that Melville tried very hard to create a really compact, condensed work of art in which he wanted to put his life-long knowledge and experience. He was just around seventy when he was working on it, and his letters at that time shows a consciousness of his old age. He says that his "vigor sensibly declines," and "What little of it is left I husband for certain matters as yet incomplete, and which indeed may never be completed."⁽²⁴⁾ He has unmistakably the premonition of death, which really came to him after two years.

One may guess a circumstance in which Melville was writing this novel. He wrote "Baby Budd" almost at a breath. Then he found it not quite satisfactory. It did not have the depth and suggestiveness he had wanted to give. He could have left it as it was, if he had been young and able to hope to write better stories in future. He began to revise it, a passage after another, and then, finding the novel not quite proportionate and symmetrical, to add a chapter or two. In the meantime, he became a critic of his own work as well as the creator. His experience and knowledge of the world and human nature came to stand in his way. In the course of refining the characterization of the main characters, he could not resist the desire to put into the novel his rich knowledge and experience, which had long been pent up within him. If he refined a part, the work as a whole became out of proportion. Then he tried to recover the proportion, and then, in spite of himself,

he again began to change a part or a passage. He lost chance to part with the novel in time. A work of art has its own life with which the creator himself should never meddle. A literary work is an expression of the author's whole person. The meaning of a novel is the meaning of the author's existence at that particular moment when he is writing the book. In two years Melville did not stay the same. His identity blurred itself into a patchwork of various mentalities he experienced during those two years.

If the above assumption is not entirely wrong, then, it may be that West's interpretation points to the meaning which the author wanted to give to the novel when he wrote "End of Book." The novel as a whole, however, is a composite of many different meanings which are the reflexion of the author's many different mentalities. The novel resists generalization and even resists being formulated into a consistent line of logic. From aesthetic point of view this is deplorable. The aesthetic value of the novel, however, lies elsewhere.

Though the novel does not have the strong integrating spirit which *Moby Dick* amply, has, *Billy Budd* is a very interesting novel. It is interesting in the sense that any good essay is interesting. Each chapter, each passage and, indeed, each sentence is full of Melvillesque turns and twists which had sometimes been a trifle obnoxious in his less mature days but are now rich in humor, wit and good-natured irony as well as wisdom and insight. Each digression, for which the author sometimes spares a whole chapter, is simply pleasurable by itself and not necessarily with reference to the whole structure of the novel. To put it in the extreme terms, each passage has its own independent life which is naturally imbued deeply with the author's original character but which has attained to something of an universal character. Above everything, one can be sure, while reading a sentence after another, that the author is simply telling what he knows and what he honestly believes. When describing Claggart, the author tells only what he knows for sure and leaves the rest for the reader to fill up by his own imagination. A less good-natured reader who is familiar with

Sanctuary's Popeye or *East of Eden's* Cathy may smile on Melville's naivete, but the point is that Melville is more humble than naive. He is more conscious of the eternal riddle of human nature than of making his own style. One could call it the sign of disintegration of Melville the artist. Nevertheless, just as a good essay is a work of art, *Billy Budd* is a work of art and one which will never cease to arrest the reader's sympathy.

There is no knowing what kind of thoughts crossed and recrossed old Melville's mind during those two years, but it is certain that he spent much time in thinking and reflecting. When one thinks of the background story, that is, Melville's cousin Gansevoort's unfortunate involvement in the *Somers* incident, one cannot help wondering with what decision Melville placed Claggart in the novel. Whatever criticism or sympathy he might have had for his afflicted cousin, the reader finds no trace of the author's personal utterance in connection with his blood-relative. Claggart is a villain, pure and simple. It may be safely assumed, however, that it must have been not without an inner struggle for the author to place Claggart in the parallel situation to Lieutenant Gansevoort's. Though there is no material ground for this guessing, it is not altogether improbable that the author's blood-relative's unhappy incident, though at first a source of inspiration, turned against him so that it deprived him of the integrating vitality. In order to maintain the fictionalized quality of the novel, he gave Claggart the role of villain pure and simple, with the result that Claggart stayed almost as abstract as the white whale, while he could give much more reality without any exertion to the other characters who had no vulnerable counterparts in reality. One may even venture to assume that the unusual delay of the completion of the book and the temptingly interpretable quality of the novel indicates, whether his being conscious or not, Melville's reluctance to conclude the matter in one way or the other. These guesses are all shots in the dark. Just as nobody knows what a dying thinks and feels, old age—the old age of a genius in particular—is a part of human experience which very few are qualified to

understand and for which to speak. When they speak for it, there are very few who understand them. The quality which baffles the *Billy Budd* criticism may be only another warning of the fact that our knowledge and experience of the human world is severely limited.

Footnote

- (1) "Ishmael in His Academic Heaven," *New Yorker*, Feb. 12, 1949, p. 76.
- (2) *Typee and Billy Budd by Herman Melville*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.), p. 269.
- (3) *AL* XII (1940), 329-346.
- (4) Raymond W. Weaver, *Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic* (New York, 1921), p. 381.
- (5) Newton Arvin, "A Note on the Background of *Billy Budd*," *AL*, XX (1948), 51-55.
- (6) "The Three Earlier Treatments of the *Billy Budd* Theme," *AL*, XXVII (1955), 251-255.
- (7) *AL* XXVIII (1957), 513-515.
- (8) *Melville's Billy Budd*, ed. F. Barron Freeman (Cam. Mass., 1948), p. 145, chap. 2. Quotations from *Billy Budd* given below are all taken from Freeman's edition.
- (9) *Ibid.* p. 147, chap. 2.
- (10) *Ibid.* p. 252, chap. 23.
- (11) E. L. Grant Watson, *NEQ*, VI (1933), 319-327.
- (12) "The Hanging Scene in Melville's *Billy Budd, Foretopman*" *MLN* LXVI (1951), 378-381.
- (13) "Herman Melville and the Forms—Irony and Social Criticism in *Billy Budd*," *Accent* XII (Summer 1952), 131-139.
- (14) R. B. West, Jr., "The Unity of *Billy Budd*," *Hud R.* V (1952), 120-127.
Leonard Casper, "The Case against Captain Vere," *Per* V (Summer 1952),

146-152.

- (15) "A Note on *Billy Budd*," *Accent* XI (1951), 58-60.
- (16) "*Billy Budd*; The Catastrophe of Innocence," *MLN* LXXIII (1958), 174.
- (17) "Melville's *Billy Budd* as 'An Inside Narrative'," *AL* XXIX (1957), 144.
- (18) *Melville's Quarrel with God*. Princeton, 1952.
- (19) cf. *Billy Budd*, p. 198, chap. 15.
- (20) *Herman Melville* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1951), p. 326.
- (21) *Herman Melville, A Critical Study* (New York, 1949), p. 258.
- (22) *The Expense of Greatness* (New York, 1940), p. 148.
- (23) R. W. B. Lewis. *The American Adam* (Chicago, 1955), p. 150.
- (24) *Portable Melville*, ed. Jay Reyda (New York, 1952), p. 635.

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