

BILLY BUDD AND THE WORLD'S IMPERFECTION

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MOST discussions of *Billy Budd, Sailor* have focused on the question of whether Vere, captain of the *Bellipotent*, was justified, morally and even legally, in sentencing Billy to the gallows. What did Herman Melville intend? Critics have been generally divided between the view that he endorses Vere's sentence and the view that "the inside narrative" ironically undercuts the endorsement, in effect making Vere an unwitting collaborator with the villainous Claggart, Billy's accuser. Attempts to adjudicate between the views or to synthesize them have generally been unsuccessful. *Billy Budd* would appear to be an ideal text for the deconstructive suspension of judgment. To suspend judgment, however, would be to inhibit interpretations that might persuasively encompass the intellectual and emotional dialectic of the work. Previous failures are not proof against the possibility of success.

A particular challenge that the tale presents lies in what might be called its allegorical burden. In describing his principal characters, Melville draws upon figures and images from the Bible (Old and New Testament), from pagan history (Plato's conception of evil), from political history (the French Revolution and its aftermath), from naval history (the heroism of Lord Nelson, the fate of the *Nore* mutiny), and from legal precedents (the martial code). Billy Budd is variously seen as Adam before the fall, as a noble barbarian, as Isaac the sacrificial victim, as an unconscious embodiment of the revolutionary spirit, and as a Christ figure. Claggart is the serpent in the garden and an example of Plato's definition of evil. Vere is the conservative upholder of law and order, a legal utilitarian and Abraham, father of Isaac, and a captain in the shadow of Lord Nelson. Not all these associations are instances of allegory, and the story does not have the systematic aspect of allegory. But *Billy Budd* is strikingly virtuosic in its historical, political, mythical, and religious density. As readers we are invited to attend to the various registers in which the narrative unfolds just as we are

expected to listen to the voices of a fugue—to its dissonances as well as its harmonies. An interpretation that isolates one or another of the registers or voices may achieve coherence, but it is a skewed coherence achieved at the expense of the narrative complexity of the story.

The symbolic resonances of the novel do not depend upon strict correspondence. Characters may depart from as well as reenact their symbolic roles—otherwise allegory would be mechanical and uninteresting. Unlike the biblical Adam, Billy resists the temptation to enlist in a conspiracy to mutiny, but he cannot resist the temptation (if that is the right word) to strike out against the satanic Claggart when Billy finds himself accused of conspiracy. Should we view him as having succumbed to temptation? His striking out against Claggart is after all an indignant reflexive act against an injustice of the grossest kind. Shouldn't we rather read that moment compassionately as an act of self-defense? For, in falsely accusing Billy, the embodiment of innocence and goodness, Claggart intends homicide. If the charge sticks, Billy would be sentenced to the gallows for mutiny. What inhibits us, or at least is intended to inhibit us, from simply taking Billy's side is the allegorical pressure of the narrative, which complicates whatever judgment we may make.

Billy's action carries the double burden of the lessons of scripture and modern political history. Consider its biblical background: if Adam's act of disobedience in eating of the Tree of Knowledge resulted in his expulsion from Eden, it also led to his loss of innocence, his acquisition of moral knowledge and acceptance of the existence of evil. Billy recalls Adam before his fall—but with a difference. In being tempted by Claggart (for that is how we may read the accusation), Billy in succumbing does not lose his innocence. His crime (one has to resist enclosing the word in quotation marks) is his very innocence in more than one sense: the obvious innocence of the accusation leveled against him and, more relevant to his fate, his innocence of the existence of evil. When he is confronted by evil, his failure to comprehend that evil becomes a refusal to accept its existence. Billy's stutter is the classic tragic flaw, the impediment that allows for violence to substitute itself for speaking. The flaw is not, however, accidental; it is an essential part of Billy's innocence, his incapacity to reason his case. Speech

is the language of reason, a postlapsarian achievement, whether for benign or malign purposes. (This needs qualification. We are told that on *The Rights of Man*, the frigate on which he sailed before he was impressed by the *Bellipotent*, Billy reasoned with his fractious mates and won their affection and admiration. But, in moments of crisis, when he is under personal threat or insulted as he is by the character Red Whiskers on *The Rights of Man*, speech fails him.) Billy is Adam redivivus, but he departs from his archetype in his incapacity for entering into the fallen world of good and evil. A criminal in the naval court of law, he is an unreconstructed innocent in the spiritual world.

In his deliberations after the act, Captain Vere says that "intent is not to the purpose" in the judgment of Billy he is about to pronounce. Vere is, of course, right to exonerate Billy from any conscious attempt to murder Claggart. Moreover he acknowledges the *natural* justice of Billy's act and associates it with divine justice. "But in natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered? How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?" It is in the political and legal sphere Vere and his fellow officers occupy that judgment must be rendered. "But do these buttons that we wear attest our allegiance to Nature? No, to the King. . . . Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly that law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it." Nature here is not Eden before the fall, which is free of violence, but the state of nature in which unmediated violence occurs and makes necessary the social contract, which mediates violence through the law. As a judge Vere sets aside the question of intent and holds Billy responsible for the *action* and its possible consequences; he cannot allow the precedent that it might set for mutiny. As readers, however, we can hardly avoid speculating about the "intent" of all the principals: Billy, Claggart, and Vere. "Intent" in Vere's drumhead court is conscious intention. Billy's motive is much deeper. His violent intolerance of Claggart's existence, once his depravity has expressed itself in the outrageous accusation, springs from his very being, which is spontaneous and reflexive. *It is not accidental*. There is an asymmetry between Claggart's evil and Billy's goodness in the fact that Claggart comprehends his adversary's goodness while Billy

fails to comprehend Claggart's villainy. It may be the perversity of existence that understanding is the possession of the devil and not of the innocent. There *is* symmetry, however, between Billy and Claggart in their absolute and murderous intolerance for each other. In the language of Yeats, Billy's uncomprehending innocence is murderous.

An impressed sailor from the ship *The Rights of Man*, Billy also recalls the actions of those who made the Revolution of 1789. Unlike Billy and prelapsarian Adam, however, the revolutionaries of 1789 were not innocent of the existence of evil, but like Billy they refused to accept its existence as ineluctable. Their ambition was to rid the world utterly of Evil and institute the Regime of Virtue. But virtue and goodness are not synonymous. As Leo Strauss points out in *Natural Right and History*, "Rousseau made a distinction between virtue and goodness. Virtue presupposes effort and habituation; it is primarily a burden, and its demands are harsh. Goodness, i.e., the desire to do good or at least the complete absence of a desire to do harm, is simply natural; the pleasures of goodness come immediately from nature; goodness is immediately connected with the natural sentiment of compassion; it belongs to the heart rather than to conscience or reason." So the correspondence between the revolutionaries and Billy Budd is not exact. What they do have in common, however, is the desire, spontaneous in Billy's case and willed in the case of the revolutionaries, to banish evil. Light will overcome darkness, virtue will cast out all the shadows of vice. In a passage that Melville deleted (and which until recently was mistakenly assigned the place of preface), Melville writes: "The opening proposition made by the Spirit of that Age, involved the rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs. In France to some extent this was bloodily effected. But what then? Straightway the Revolution itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the Kings. Under Napoleon it enthroned upstart kings, and initiated the prolonged agony of continual war whose final throe was Waterloo." The dream of the moral perfection of the political world is a destructive dream, and Billy in his unconscious way embodies that dream. The moral and political history of mankind is a history of the *necessity* of good and evil. This is the conservative wisdom of the novel.

Vere, we are told, was a reader of serious books "treating of

actual men and events no matter what the era," and the narrator singles out Montaigne as one of Vere's favored writers "who, free from cant and convention, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities." What in Montaigne would apply to the case before him? I do not know what of Montaigne Melville had in mind in connecting him with Vere, but the choice is apt. In his essay "Of Vanity" Montaigne writes:

Nothing endangers a state except innovation; change alone lends shape to injustice and tyranny. When some part is dislocated, we can prop it up; we can fight against letting the alteration and corruption natural to all things carry us too far from our beginnings and principles. But to undertake to recast so great a mass, to change the foundations of so great a structure, that is a job for those who wipe out a picture in order to clean it, who want to reform defects of detail by universal confusion and cure illnesses by death, *who desire not so much to change as to overthrow everything* [Cicero]. The world is ill fitted to cure itself; it is so impatient of its affliction that it only aims at getting rid of it, without considering the cost. We see by a thousand examples that it usually cures itself to its own disadvantage. Riddance from a present evil is not cure, unless there is an all-round improvement in condition.

Compare this passage to what is said of Vere: "His settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no few minds in those days, minds by nature not inferior to his own." Melville goes on to enforce the integrity of Vere's conservative convictions by distinguishing his motives from those of the aristocracy who were "incensed" by the new theories because they "were inimical to the privileged classes." In contrast "Captain Vere disinterestedly opposed them not alone because they seemed to him insusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind." If such a view does not address the question of whether Billy should be hanged, it does justify a judgment against him.

But, in making Billy such a sympathetic character, Melville does not make it easy for us to accept this conservative wisdom. It is as if in order to embrace it, we need to repudiate the claim of goodness. If we read on beyond what I have quoted in the passage that Melville deleted, it becomes evident that conservative wisdom is not final for Melville, for he goes on to say: "During those years not the wisest could have foreseen that the outcome of all would be what to some thinkers it has apparently turned out to be, a political advance along nearly the whole line for Europeans." And he remarks the analogy of the Revolution to the Great Mutiny on the Nore, which resulted in "important reforms in the British Navy." (I don't think that the deletion of the passage from the "final" edition, which is itself a matter of controversy, means that we should not consider it in reflecting about Melville's intention, for it seems to correspond to the movement of his narrative thought. If, as textual scholars who have studied the genesis of the textual note, Melville revised the manuscript to make the tale more dramatic and less explicitly essayistic, the deletion does not signify a disavowal of the ideas.)

Conservatives characteristically warn us about the unintended consequences of violent revolutionary action as if those consequences are necessarily destructive, but in this instance the consequences of revolution and mutiny, unforeseen by "the wisest," are benign. The reader may even be provoked to wonder whether revolutionary violence might not at times be necessary to change the world for the better. It is a provocation that Melville himself would have doubtless resisted. Conservative wisdom may not be final, but neither is it trumped. The Revolution does not, indeed cannot, triumph on its own terms; if there is a positive outcome, it is ameliorating reform. Meliorism accepts what the Revolution cannot abide, the insurmountable imperfection of the world.

Melville's mistrust of the Revolution, inspired by the Enlightenment belief that the world can and should banish evil from the world, shows in his conception of Claggart, a creature of evil according to nature. Melville is careful to dissociate his conception from that of Calvin, for whom sin is original in all of mankind. Instead he invokes the platonic view of natural depravity, which is selective and not universal in mankind. "In a list of definitions included in the authentic translation of Plato, a list attributed

to him, occurs this: 'Natural Depravity, a depravity according to nature,' a definition which, though savoring of Calvinism, by no means involves Calvin's dogma as to total mankind." Depravity is linked to the idea of deprivation. Claggart, deprived of the goodness he sees embodied in Billy, desires it and turns enviously against him because he cannot possess it. Melville recognizes the pathos of Claggart's existence in his "melancholy expression," which has "in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban." (The suggestion of homosexual desire, often noted by readers, is delicate; Melville intends no association between homosexuality and evil. It is the pathos of Claggart's situation, perhaps the only moment in the narrative that evokes our sympathy with him.) Without subscribing to the doctrine of Original Sin (Billy's natural goodness is evidence against it), Melville nevertheless challenges Enlightenment philosophy, which postulates the natural goodness of all persons and the corrupting effect of society.

I have left suspended the question of why Vere should have decided against the advice of his subordinate officers to sentence Billy to death and with such precipitousness. The sentence is effectively delivered a moment after Billy strikes ("Struck by an angel of God, but the angel must hang"). Vere's deliberations afterward are a rationale (or, if one prefers, a rationalization) after the decision has already been made. The dramatic effect is bitterly paradoxical and is the cause of endless controversy about the rightness of the sentence. What makes it paradoxical is that the precipitousness of the judgment is preceded by a lengthy characterization of Vere as a deeply thoughtful and morally serious captain capable of "rapid decision" but not given to impulsive judgment. He is presented as a leader decidedly superior in every respect to his subordinates. Could it be, as some critics have suspected, that the admiring characterization of Vere is ironically intended by Melville? Very little in the characterization (his occasional pedantic quality has been noted) suggests irony. Pedants, it could be countered, do not act impulsively. Vere would seem to be the very opposite of a hanging judge. Given his extraordinary paternal sympathy for Billy, why did Vere decide to have him executed? If, as is the case, there is room within the naval code for a less draconian solution, why didn't Vere embrace it?

It is not enough to argue, as Richard Posner has done, that there is nothing illegal in Vere's judgment. There would be nothing illegal if, as Posner himself admits, "Vere [had] waited until the ship rejoined the fleet before proceeding against Billy" and had allowed "the admiral commanding the fleet to convene a regular court-martial." Legal argument does not resolve the matter. Posner speaks of "a literary imperative" that Billy "be tried on the ship." I believe he is right that the drama would be diffused were the trial suspended; indeed there would be no drama. Moreover not to have passed judgment would have also diffused the drama. But the "literary imperative" does not fully explain or justify Vere's decision. The question remains: what is the logic, if there is logic, in turning the humane and compassionate Vere into a hanging judge? Why should Vere want to bring upon himself the torment that follows the decision, if it were not necessary? The questions assume that we have been given a sympathetic portrait of Vere and that the portrait is not vulnerable to the undermining ironies that one finds in critics hostile to Vere. It assumes, in other words, that we trust the narrator's characterization of him as a thoughtful, conscientious, and accomplished captain. Psychology alone cannot provide an answer to the question.

We need always to keep in mind that the narrative unfolds in a number of registers. Melville has written a fable (not a naturalistic fiction) in which there are motives that are political and religious as well as psychological. He is realistic in representing what might be called the classic counterrevolutionary reaction to all threats of insurrection. It is political exigency, not the strict requirements of the law, that motivates Vere's decision. He is a utilitarian, focused on consequences rather than motive. Whatever its limitations in the ethical and philosophical realm, utilitarianism or pragmatism (the argument from consequences) is a main guide to political behavior. Which is not to say that one could not mount an argument against the judgment of Billy even on utilitarian grounds. But the narrative does not provide it. Melville does provide Vere with an elaborate and forceful argument for his decision, while his subordinates are allowed little more than sentiment and a legal loophole. Here is the essence of Vere's judgment: "'to the people the foretopman's deed, however it be worded in the announce-

ment, will be plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of mutiny. What penalty for that should follow, they know. But it does not follow. *Why?* They will ruminare. You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Aye. They know the well-founded alarm—the panic it struck throughout England. Your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous.”

Wherever the reader's sympathies may lie, the balance of argument favors Vere. In his decision about Billy's fate, Vere is a vehicle of a fable about political realism in a time of crisis. But he is also a character, not merely a vehicle, and psychological anguish informs his decision and its aftermath. Torn between the political burden he has assumed and his humane and paternal sympathies for Billy, Vere will live out the rest of his life in spiritual torment.

Much has been made of the surgeon's judgment of the state of Vere's mind shortly after the death of Claggart. The surgeon suggests the possibility of insanity. "Was Captain Vere suddenly affected in his mind, or was it but a transient excitement, brought about by so strange and extraordinary a tragedy? . . . He recalled the unwonted agitation of Captain Vere and his excited exclamations so at variance with his normal manner. Was he unhinged?" I think that we are intended to construe Vere's suspected, but unconfirmed, "unhinged" behavior not as a judgment against *his* judgment, but rather as an expression of the intolerable conflict within him between his sense of duty and his sympathy with Billy. Melville has internalized the drama of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac. The narrator speculates that in the closeted interview between Vere and Billy after the trial "the austere devotee of military duty . . . 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." There is, however, a momentous difference between the two instances. Secular law substitutes for God, but, unlike the God in Genesis, the Law shows no mercy to Isaac's descendant. Abraham's subsequent life is one of promise, Vere's of tragedy.

Melville writes from intimacy with the subject. His own sanity was under suspicion. Melville's biography suggests a possible parallel between Vere's tormented paternal affection for Billy and his own guilt-ridden anguish over the suicide of his son Malcolm,

of whom Melville said that he had never made an unfilial gesture, though, as Herschel Parker remarks, the suicide itself may qualify.

Throughout the trial Billy looks to Vere, prosecutor and judge, for consolation and guidance. Is Billy enacting once more his innocence and failing to see where his interests lie? If Vere's judgment of Billy is the crux of the narrative, Billy's "judgment" of Vere is of no less importance. What are we to make of Billy's blessing the man who has condemned him to death? Since the interview between Vere and Billy that precedes the hanging is barred to the narrator, he (and we) can only speculate about what has occurred. Did Vere persuade Billy of the rightness of the judgment, and is the blessing an endorsement of it? Has Billy lost his innocence in the sense of ignorance of the world and come to acknowledge the ineluctable moral modality of the world as good and evil? Or, having been held in Vere's Abrahamic embrace, seen the suffering on Vere's face and heard it in his voice, is he responding with the compassion that is natural to him? (Rousseau as well as Christ may be lurking in the background.) In any event the outcome of the interview is a reversal of expectation: Billy is reconciled to his fate, while Vere is never reconciled. It is not that Vere experiences remorse for having condemned Billy to death. When he is heard to "murmur words . . . 'Billy Budd, Billy Budd,' . . . these were not the accents of remorse." Vere's torment derives from the fact that he has been subject to the necessity (as he sees it) of condemning Billy. Billy emerges from the interview no longer prelapsarian Adam but a Christ figure. Melville here exploits the typological tradition in Christian thought, which views the coming of Christ as a redeeming answer to Adam's fallen condition.

But Vere is no Adam to be redeemed. If we were not persuaded by the rightness of Vere's judgment, the blessing would nevertheless seem to confirm it. Nothing in the story implies that he needs to be forgiven. As it turns out, the blessing calms the crew, but it fails to console Vere. He spends his last days in spiritual torment afflicted, as I have suggested, by the necessity that compelled him to perform his duty. The world is imperfect, susceptible to reform, but resistant to perfection. Both goodness and evil in their absolute incarnations prove to be mutually destructive in their failure to respect the moral intractability of our fallen world. It is the les-

son that Hannah Arendt draws from *Billy Budd* in *On Revolution*. Vere is the tragic catalyst for revealing this conservative wisdom.

And yet . . . no reader alert to the pathos and symbolic resonances of the story can rest content with the view that the meaning of *Billy Budd* is reducible to conservative wisdom or to the meliorist view of gradual human progress. Billy transcends the execution. As an "angel of God" he exists on an entirely different plane before and after the murder of Claggart. It is his presence that has the extraordinary and paradoxical effect of extinguishing the mutinous spirit of the crew, paradoxical because it is Billy and not the execution that is the deterrent to mutiny. As a Christ figure, he cannot ultimately be contained by the world as good and evil. It is hard to resist the suggestion that there is in the story a current of Joban protest against the *necessary* (always necessary) constitution of our world as good and evil. The protest takes the form of irony in the account of the misrepresentation of the events that took place in "a naval chronicle of the time." Here is an excerpt:

"The enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal [Billy Budd], appear the greater in view of the character of the victim [Claggart], a middle-aged man respectable and discreet, belonging to that minor official grade, the petty officers, upon whom, as none know better than the commissioned gentlemen, the efficiency of His Majesty's navy so largely depends. His function was a responsible one, at once onerous and thankless; and his fidelity in it the greater because of his strong patriotic impulse. . . .

"The criminal paid the penalty of his crime. The promptitude of the punishment has proved salutary. Nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard H.M.S. *Bellipotent*."

"Nothing amiss"? What kind of world is this that can so grotesquely transform, indeed reverse, the truth of what had occurred? It is a world alienated from both Nature and God. Melville concludes the chapter in which the account is reported by noting that it is all that "hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd." It is

Melville who rescues the truth in his "inside narrative" from the distortions of the outside narrative. Could it be a further irony and a source of torment for Vere that he has by necessity contributed to the grotesque distortion of the truth and cannot disclose what he knows of the characters of Billy and Claggart?

But irony alone does not register Melville's protest. It is contained as well in the character and presence of Billy, who embodies the promise, never to be kept, of a glorious world of which mankind is bereft. If this were a pious story in the Christian tradition, the promise of a regained paradise would be affirmed. But there is no such affirmation in the story. The Christian promise only intensifies the tragedy. I spoke of the multiple registers of the narrative and compared our reading of it to listening to a fugue, its harmonies and dissonances. I hear at the end a dissonance between the conservative wisdom of its political voice and the Edenic imagination of its spiritual voice. I distinguish between the spiritual and the religious, because Melville conceives institutional Christianity as compromised in its subservience to the exigencies of politics and war. The chaplain who comes to console Billy before the execution admits to himself that Billy's innocence "was even a better thing than religion wherewith to go to Judgment" and that he could never "convert [him] to a dogma." Melville concludes this chapter with what comes close to an indictment of institutional Christianity: "Bluntly put, a chaplain is the minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War—Mars. As such, he is as incongruous as a musket would be on the altar at Christmas. Why then is he there? Because 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."

Melville reluctantly accepts the political and military wisdom that Vere exemplifies, but he does not embrace it. It is not a matter of taking sides in the debate between those who accept the conservative wisdom of the novel and those who see in it an ironic subversion of its conservatism. The tension between the two visions forms the tragic core of Herman Melville's great last work.

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