

## HOME

This "essay," once a handout in my American literature courses, traces four readings of *Billy Budd*, each more insightful than the previous. The progress through these readings reveals a great deal about our system of justice, as it once was and as in many ways it still is today, and what we can learn from it or even perhaps do about it.

# On Melville's *Billy Budd*

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*The person who never reads the same book twice is destined to read the same book over and over again.*

- My "paraphrase" of Barthes

*. . . those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere.*

- Roland Barthes himself, p. 16

*Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless.*

- Jonathan Culler, p. 123)

*[F]or a decision to be just and responsible, it must . . . be both regulated and without regulation: it must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, rejustify it, at least reinvent it in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle. Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely.*

- Derrida, "The Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*

### **The Naïve Reading**

Consider this: Melville's *Billy Budd* is a story about the distinction between divine justice, on the one hand, and human justice, on the other. Here's a summary of the "naïve" reading that leads to this conclusion: When John Claggart falsely accuses Billy Budd of inciting mutiny, Captain Vere (whose name suggests "truth") arranges a confrontation between the accuser and the accused. When Claggart shamelessly repeats the lie to Budd's face and when Captain Vere insists that Budd defend himself and when Budd is struck speechless (if you like) and, therefore, STRIKES Claggart who falls down dead, Captain Vere suddenly has a problem on his hands, a problem he did not bargain for. You see, he *feels* that Budd is innocent but he also knows that he has killed a superior officer, an offense punishable by death. Here's how Melville presents Captain Vere's argument at the drumhead court:

"How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a

fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so? - Does that state it aright? You sign sad assent. Well, I too feel that, the full force of that. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true that, in receiving our commissions, we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents. When war is declared are we, the commissioned fighters, previously consulted? We fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence. So in other particulars. For suppose condemnation to follow these present proceedings. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is this: That however pitilessly that law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it. . . .

"To steady us a bit, let us recur to the facts. - In war-time at sea a man-of-war's man strikes his superior in grade, and the blow kills. Apart from its effect, the blow itself is, according to Articles of War, a capital crime. Furthermore -"

"Aye, sir," emotionally broke in the officer of marines, "in one sense it was. But surely Budd purposed neither mutiny nor homicide."

"Surely not, my good man. And before a court less arbitrary and more merciful than a martial one that plea would largely extenuate. At the Last Assizes it shall acquit. But how here? We proceed under the law of the Mutiny Act. In feature no child can resemble his father more than that act resembles in spirit the thing from which it derives - War. In His Majesty's service - in this ship indeed - there are Englishmen forced to fight for the King against their will. Against their conscience, for aught we know. Though as their fellow creatures some of us may appreciate their position, yet as navy officers, what reck we of it? Still less recks the enemy. Our impressed men he would fain cut down in the same swath with our volunteers. As regards the enemy's naval conscripts, some of whom may even share our own abhorrence of the regicidal French Directory, it is the same on our side. War looks but to the frontage, the appearance. And the Mutiny Act, War's child, takes after the father.

Budd's intent or nonintent is nothing to the purpose." (68-70)

I hope it is clear from this long quotation (which could itself be analyzed in detail and at some length - in fact, I shall refer back to it in due time) that Captain Vere's position, eloquently as well as skillfully articulated here, is roughly the equivalent of Christ's injunction to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. It is also the "origin" (if you will) of the "naïve" reading according to which the story is about a conflict between divine justice, on the one hand, and human justice, on the other. At this point I need to add only one more coda here (before moving on, of course), and that is that Melville presents Billy's character in such a way as to imply that he is practically prelapsarian in his overall goodness while Claggart is presented in such a way as to seem most appallingly postlapsarian, downright evil, if you want to know the truth, born that way to boot - that is, not rendered so by "society" or by running around with the wrong sorts of friends.

### **A Structuralist Reading**

*. . . truth is revealed only when formal order is destroyed.*  
- Dryden, p. 209

Not on your life, says Edgar A. Dryden (though not in so many words, of course) to the above in his splendid *Melville's Thematics of Form*. His argument is essentially to show that while most readers (erroneously) assume that Captain Vere is the story's tragic hero, the fact of the matter is that a "better" reading will reveal him as Melville's target, if you want to know the "truth."

Another thing I want to emphasize at the outset is that EVERYTHING DRYDEN SAYS IS SUPPORTED BY THE TEXT he is analyzing. In other words, he cannot be accused of reading-into! Well, how does Dryden denormalize (as it were) the reading above? Rather simply even if rather spectacularly. Here's as brief a version of Dryden's argument as I can possibly give you: Captain Vere's argument is very formally ordered and highly symmetrical. Furthermore, it is in keeping with this compassionate and wise man's philosophy according to which (as Melville's text tells us) "with mankind forms, . . . measured forms are everything" (84). Interestingly enough, Dryden points out, the published report concerning the whole Budd affair at the end of the story, which is taken from a "naval chronicle of the time," and which thus represents an "authorized" version of the whole affair (85), is also formally ordered and highly symmetrical. The trouble is that this "authorized" account is totally false. According to this version Billy Budd was evil while John Claggart was good, etc. Perhaps, Dryden argues, we may find something in Melville's text that would confirm a suspicion we may already be entertaining - namely, that formally ordered and highly symmetrical

arguments may themselves be suspicious. Dryden finds the text in question very close to the one where Captain Vere makes his claim about "measured forms." It reads as follows: "The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. TRUTH UNCOMPROMISINGLY TOLD WILL ALWAYS HAVE ITS RAGGED EDGES" (84; capitals mine).

In contradistinction to Captain Vere's argument or the naval chronicle's "authorized" version, then, Dryden asks us to examine Melville's own way of telling his story. Is it formally ordered and highly symmetrical? No, in thunder! In fact, it is full of inconsistencies, digressions, inexplicably strange passages and events, and it even has several endings, as if Melville couldn't quite get himself around to finishing the story at all. The clear implication is that Captain Vere's articulate discourse, formally ordered and measured as it is, is little more than "fiction" or "fable" (the same applies to the "authorized" version in the naval chronicle), in other words, it is the "truth" Vere/y compromisingly told. Are you beginning to see Captain Vere as Melville's target by now? Are you getting something like the high heebie-jeebies? You should. Why? Well, because if Dryden is right (and, of course, he is) then Captain Vere is a good/evil man, which is absolutely frightening. For one thing, there's textual evidence (and Dryden is quick to point to it, too) in Melville's story that would indicate that Captain Vere acts the way in which he acts with respect to the whole Budd affair to protect his career as much as to administer justice (once you are cognizant of this, it is easy to re-read that long passage quoted above and see this issue writ large within the same text).

Not, mind you, that Captain Vere is anything but compassionate and wise. That's precisely what makes him so frightening. Like all figures of authority who have power, he administers justice in the name of the institution that has empowered him in the first place. Everything he says makes sense. And the justice he administers seems (at least superficially) also just. Yet though he is legally right, he is morally wrong. He acts according to the spirit of the letter, which means that he willy-nilly betrays, in a sense, both the spirit and the letter. But Dryden's argument is even more radical and subversive than that. He says "that the 'Athée' [the name of an enemy - that is, French ship - suggesting "godlessness"], nominal symbol of the formless world which Vere fears and despises, is at the same time a perfect representative of the orderly martial world which Vere himself commands [which] suggests that *chaos may in fact lurk within the forms themselves*" (212; italics mine).

### **A Deconstructive Reading**

*Billy, who cannot understand ambiguity, who takes pleasant words at face value and then obliterates Claggart for suggesting that one could*

*do otherwise, whose sudden blow is a violent denial of any discrepancy between his being and his doing, ends up radically illustrating the very discrepancy he denies.*

- Barbara Johnson, p. 86

With Barbara Johnson's splendid *Critical Difference* we are willy-nilly plunged into deconstruction. At the moment I shall not attempt to explain this radical and highly subversive critical mode, except to say that what you are about to see is an example of it. At the moment you may well ask (being, as you undoubtedly are, still very impressed by Dryden's splendidly anti-naïve reading), "you mean it is possible to be even more intelligent about Melville's story?" I remember asking myself the same thing when I first noticed the chapter in Barbara Johnson's book on *Billy Budd*. But I began to read it anyway and I soon found myself in the throes of a critically different excitement! The first thing that truly grabbed my attention was a remark Johnson makes apropos of the following quotation from Melville's story: "innocence and guilt personified by Claggart and Budd in effect changed places" (62). The narrator says this apropos of Billy having killed Claggart. This is what Barbara Johnson says apropos of the passage in question: "Interestingly enough, Melville both invites an allegorical reading and subverts the very terms of its consistency when he writes of the murder: 'Innocence and guilt . . .'" (83). Now that's deconstruction, folks! "Both invites . . . and subverts"? Wow!

Needless to say, ALL CLAIMS JOHNSON MAKES FOR HER READING ARE SUPPORTED BY MELVILLE'S TEXT. What does Johnson, then, claim? I shall try to be as brief as possible about this splendidly anti-naïve reading. Johnson's first item on the agenda is to put into question Billy's innocence. (Melville himself tells us that "innocence was [Billy's] blinder" 49.) She asks us to consider Billy a kind of "reader" (Johnson calls him a "literal reader" 85). Billy is a "literal reader" in that he seems to take things at face value. He seems to believe, in fact, that things are what they seem to be. If Claggart appears to be nice to Billy (and he does) then Claggart *must* be nice to Billy (he isn't, of course). Implied in Johnson's argument at this point is the notion that the innocence we all seem to value in Billy is perhaps less than valuable. First of all, though he appears *almost* prelapsarian, Billy is really postlapsarian all the same. Here is how Melville himself puts the case:

Though our Handsome Sailor had as much of masculine beauty as one can expect anywhere to see, nevertheless, like the beautiful woman in one of Hawthorne's minor tales ["The Birthmark"], there was just one thing amiss in him. No visible blemish indeed, as with the lady; no, but an occasional liability to a vocal defect. Though in the hour of elemental uproar or peril he was everything that a sailor

should be, yet under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse. In this particular Billy was a *striking* instance that the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden, still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet earth. (17; italics mine)

Johnson is quick to make much of that apparently innocent word "striking" in the quotation above. For that's exactly what Billy does when his "vocal defect" is most evidently operative in the story - that is, when Claggart repeats the false accusation to his face. At this point, to do as much justice to Johnson's argument as possible, we must turn to Claggart himself for a moment. You see, what Johnson claims Claggart questions in Billy is precisely the potential discrepancy between seeming and being. In other words, *is* Billy what he appears to be - that is, "innocent"? Interestingly enough when Billy apparently accidentally and innocently spills soup in Claggart's path at one point in the story, Claggart says "Handsomely done my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it too!" (34). Johnson is quick to point out that this invocation of the famous proverb is not an affirmation but a denial of its significance in this case. In other words, Claggart suspects that Billy is not what he seems to be. Claggart, of course, proves himself right (dead right, if you will) concerning Billy. But the matter is not as simple as it appears. Nevertheless, as Johnson points out, Claggart's view of Billy is perfectly reasonable. When Billy is impressed into the man-of-war, when he is taken from a merchant marine named "The Rights of Man," he says goodbye to the last-named ship. Melville claims that Billy didn't mean anything by this, but how can Claggart know for sure? Then there is the soup-spilling episode - apparently innocent and accidental, but how can Claggart know for sure? Then, when Claggart sends one of his cronies to invite Billy to join a fictitious mutiny, Billy doesn't report the incident (it would have been his duty to do so) even though he refuses to join the apparent conspirators. No wonder, then, that Claggart wants to make sure that there is no "man trap" "under" the "daisies" (54; the metaphor is Claggart's).

Johnson's point is that Melville's presentation of the character of Billy is itself not exactly what it appears to be. Even though Billy is a "literal reader," he doesn't (as Johnson argues) seem to be incapable of editing out whatever doesn't agree with his naïve view of the world. In contrast to Billy, Claggart is an "ironic reader" (85). This implies that he *always* questions the discrepancy between seeming and being. But (as Johnson cleverly shows us) this is not *always* the case. When one of his cronies makes up lies about what Billy did and said, Melville tells us that Claggart "never suspected the veracity of these reports" (41). In other

words, Claggart can be naïve, too, when it comes to believing whatever fits well into the economy of his prior prejudices. Both readers, then, suppress or edit out (that is, fail to read) whatever does not mesh with their world views. Their innocence and guilt appear as the two sides of the same coin. And this coin flip-flops at the most crucial moment. As Johnson points out, "Billy is sweet, innocent, and harmless, yet he kills. Claggart is evil, perverted, mendacious, yet he dies a victim" (82). In the final analysis, then, "the fatal blow, far from being an unmotivated accident, is the gigantic return of the power of negation that Billy has been repressing all his life" (90).

There is, of course, more to Johnson's reading than I have indicated here, but I need to move on to some final considerations now. How does Captain Vere fare in Johnson's deconstructive text? Perhaps slightly better than in Dryden's. For Johnson, it is judgment itself that Melville is asking us to judge. A few quick quotes should bring this (exciting) discussion to an end: "once Vere has defined his context, he has also in fact reached his verdict" (103). The trouble is, of course, that Vere defines his context way before the trial. He defines it, in fact, as soon as he witnesses the fatal blow, for it is then and there that he exclaims: "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" Being a learned man, Vere kills not by means of a blow, but by means of words, language. Billy kills because he cannot speak. Vere kills because he can. What's our judgment of judgment, then? "It would seem," says Barbara Johnson, "that the function of judgment is to convert an ambiguous situation into a decidable one" (105), or "law is the forcible transformation of ambiguity into decidability" (107). This notion is as profound as it is subversive. Yet what it claims in no more than "judge not lest ye be judged." Wow! Is Christianity, then, perhaps the "original" deconstruction? In my own *Pious Impostures and Unproven Words* I do, in fact, make some such claim, but that's neither here nor there right now. What is here (as well as there, of course) is the virtue of anti-naïveté. Which brings me to the last section of this handout.

### **A New Historical Reading**

New Historicism is heavily indebted to deconstruction. One of the most brilliant readings of *Billy Budd* along these lines is Brook Thomas's reading in *Cross Examination of Law and Literature*. As its name implies, New Historicism combines an analysis of literary works with whatever historical backdrop is deemed relevant or important to our understanding. The "new" in this historicism has to do, among other things, with the recognition that history (or reality) is itself a kind of construct (or fiction, if you will, in the sense of something made rather than merely stumbled upon by humanity). What Brook Thomas does, then, is analyze Melville's story in the context of certain legal questions in Melville's lifetime, paying particular attention to Melville's father-in-

law as well, Lemuel Shaw, who may have been the model for Captain Vere. Like Vere, Shaw sacrificed his conscience rather than "violate" an unjust law (he felt that slavery was wrong, yet he upheld the law requiring the return of escaped slaves to their "rightful" owners).

In what follows I shall resort to a shortcut. Instead of reporting on Brook Thomas's interpretation as a whole, I shall cite some of the most strikingly important and interesting passages. Given the foregoing (and your possible prior knowledge of Melville's story), these quotations should speak for themselves.

"I do not mean to either excuse Vere's technical errors or to argue that technicalities are unimportant. . . . [But] to base criticism of the legal order on procedural errors is to risk explaining injustice as the acts of corrupt, or even just well-intentioned but confused individuals in positions of authority. It avoids questioning the order to which the legal system is intricately related.

"One lesson that we might draw from our historical cases and from *Billy Budd* is that Vere, Shaw, and Parson are corrupt and hypocritical men, employing a rhetoric of strict adherence to the law in order to disguise their conscious manipulation of the law. Or, more generously, we might conclude that they are sincere men who are so concerned with fulfilling their duty that they unconsciously violate the very principles they claim to uphold. A more fruitful line of inquiry is to try to understand what it is about the logic of the legal order they have sworn to defend that causes three well-intentioned men seemingly to contradict their own most sacred principles. (p. 212)

"If Vere uses his rhetoric to manipulate opinion, . . . he sincerely believes that it is based on an authority outside of himself, an authority that he submits to . . . Emanating from a set of impersonal laws outside the self, rather than from a single, powerful individual, ideology so pervades each person's consciousness that no one seems capable of escaping its constraints.

". . . a recent legal critic . . . argues that the rule of law has become an effective political weapon because it is able to offer reassurance while it contributes to repression. It reassures by appearing to demonstrate that seemingly unjust actions are actually just because human society follows a legal, rational system of laws. It is repressive because its demonstration depends on the assumption that the legal, rational system of laws governing society is just. This reification of the law keeps people from asking whether seemingly unjust actions may be caused by the very system that the logic of the law justifies." (p. 218)

As I said before, these quotations will speak for themselves, in the context of this whole handout, of course. The lesson in all of this?



Melville's brilliant work combined with the splendid work of some of his critics helps us see that although laws are necessary, they can be manipulated in such ways that justice is not always the result, even though the intention of laws is, among other things, to administer justice. The idea is as old as the Bible, which tells us not to judge, lest we be judged, and which also tells us that the letter of the law kills while its spirit gives life. The legal system should make us think and think hard. Understanding all this should also make us better "judges," for the biblical injunction against judging is not a prohibition, but a warning that we shall be judged according to how we ourselves have judged. If we have been just, we have nothing to fear.

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[Back to Top](#)

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