MELVILLE'S FINAL STAGE, IRONY: A RE-EXAMINATION OF BILLY BUDD CRITICISM

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THE AGED Melville, like the Dansker of Billy Budd, “never interferes in aught and never gives advice.” Melville wrote Billy Budd, his last work, without interjecting moral pronouncements; for this reason the story is usually taken as Melville’s “Testament of acceptance,” or, in the latest and most extended criticism, as Melville’s “Recognition of necessity.” Most critics, by mistaking form for content, have missed the main importance of Billy Budd. Actually, Melville’s latest tale shows no radical change in his thought. Change lies in his style. Billy Budd is a tale of irony, penned by a writer who preferred allegory and satire to straight narrative, and who, late in life, turned to irony for his final attack upon evil.  

Billy Budd is a simple, naïve sailor removed from the merchant ship Rights-of-Man and impressed into service in His Majesty’s Navy to fight the French revolutionists in the year 1797. Aboard H.M.S. Indomitable, he unhappily finds himself the object of unreasoning hatred by John Claggart, Master-at-Arms of the ship. Claggart denounces Billy to Captain Vere as a mutineer. Vere, aware that the charge is groundless, offers Billy the opportunity to face Claggart and make effective reply. But Billy, who stutters in moments of stress, cannot summon his speech organs to his defense. Exasperated in his inability to refute the lie, Billy strikes Claggart, who falls dead. Captain Vere, contemptuous of the dead

1 The present writer owes his thanks to Professor Gay Wilson Allen for first suggesting that Billy Budd might best be understood as a work of irony.

F. Barron Freeman, in his long critical introduction to his own edition of Billy Budd, comes close to recognizing the vital role of irony in the tale when he observes: “outward events become submerged in inward delineations and sometimes make the impatient reader wish for more definite statements, more tangible proof, that what the personages and the tale seem to imply is what Melville intended.” See F. Barron Freeman, Melville’s Billy Budd (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), p. 51. Freeman gives a good deal of evidence of irony in Billy Budd, but he twists it into conformity with “the Christian doctrine of resignation.” His interpretation will be discussed later in this paper. Quotations from Billy Budd are from the Freeman text.
body of Claggart, exclaims, "Struck dead by an angel of God. Yet the angel must hang!" For this is a time of revolutions, and the English Navy has been racked with rebellion; an empire may be lost. Discipline must be maintained. "Forms, measured forms" are all. And so, Billy Budd, morally innocent, must die for striking and killing a petty officer of His Majesty's Navy. Billy, before going to his death, shouts aft, "God bless Captain Vere," honoring the author of his fate.

Billy's last words, "God bless Captain Vere," have been taken by almost all critics to be Melville's last words, words of accommodation, resignation, his last whispered "acceptance" of the realities of life. Mumford, for example, says: "At last he [Melville] was reconciled ... [he found] the ultimate peace of resignation. ... As Melville's own end approached, he cried out with Billy Budd: God bless Captain Vere!"²

The disillusion of the world toasted Melville as a long-unclaimed member of their heartbroken family. Here indeed was a prize recruit—Melville, the rebel who had questioned "the inalienable right to property, the dogmas of democracy, the righteousness of imperialist wars and Christian missions ... [who] dared to discuss in a voice louder than a whisper such horrific subjects as cannibalism, venereal disease and polygamy ..."³ had, in the ripe wisdom of old age, uttered "God bless Captain Vere," thereby accepting authority. A prize catch indeed, if it were really so!

E. L. Grant Watson tips his hat to the Melville of Billy Budd:

Melville [he says] is no longer a rebel. It should be noted that Billy Budd has not, even under the severest provocation, any element of rebellion in him; he is too free a soul [this man with the rope around his neck] to need a quality which is a virtue only in slaves. ... Billy Budd is marked by this supreme quality of acceptance. ... [Melville's] philosophy in it has grown from that of rebellion to ... acceptance. ... ⁴

Watson's bias towards a philosophy of acceptance is clear; he searches in Melville for confirmation of his own dogma.

Charles Weir, Jr., makes much of the "God Bless Captain Vere"

² Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville (New York, 1929), p. 357.
scene, accepting it at face value. He says: "The paradox has been established: injustice [the hanging of Billy] may find its place within the pattern of a larger all-embracing divine righteousness." What this all-embracing divine righteousness may be is not specified. Is Vere God? Or is he, as he himself very clearly sets forth, the agent of the King? If the latter, then Billy is the unhappy pawn in a game he never understood, aristocratic England versus democratic France.

Both Watson and Weir warn the reader that Melville must be plumbed and probed if he is to surrender his secrets. Watson says, "The critic's function is rather to hint at what lies beneath—hidden, sometimes, under the surface." Weir warns that, "in writing Billy Budd Melville had a deeper intent than that of simply telling a story." And yet Watson and Weir ignore their own good advice, for in propounding their theory of Melville's "acceptance," they do not probe beneath Billy's last words. They accept "God bless Captain Vere" as the denouement of the tale, its final judgment, as the ripe wisdom of a tired Melville come to terms with life.

These critics, it seems to me, commit three basic mistakes in their attempt at divining Melville's final moments of thought in his story. First, they divorce Billy Budd from all of Melville's other works in the way that a man might search for roots in treetops. Second, they isolate Melville from the Gilded Age, the time in which Melville produced Billy Budd. Third, and most important, they accept at face value the words "God bless Captain Vere," forgetting that Melville is always something other than obvious. It is the purpose of this paper to examine Melville's final work along the lines suggested.

Little is known of Melville's last days, and this should be recog-

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6 Watson, op. cit., p. 321.
7 Weir, op. cit., p. 280.
9 The fullest treatment of the theory of Melville's "acceptance" can be found in William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), pp. 231-249. Thorp agrees with Sedgwick. He says: "With good reason, Billy Budd has been called 'Melville's testament of acceptance...'." (Literary History of the United States, New York, 1948, I, 469).
8 F. O. Matthiessen is the only critic to my knowledge who has attempted to place Melville in the context of the Gilded Age, that most disastrous of periods for the serious American writer. See Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York, 1946), pp. 513-514.
nized as a handicap for those who wish to prove the theory of Melville’s “acceptance” as well as for those who may hold contrasting views. But the few scraps that do remain of Melville’s later life point to an unchanged Melville, the same Melville of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre.* Mumford reports that in 1871 Melville studied Spinoza, marking a passage which read: “‘Happiness . . . consists in a man’s being able to maintain his own being. . . .’” Mumford goes on to observe significantly: “[This] described [Melville’s] own effort. In a more fruitful age, his being would have been maintained in harmony with, not in opposition to, the community; but at all events his vital duty was to maintain it.” This is an unchanged Melville. Another scrap of information, from a letter to a British fan, indicates Melville’s critical frame of mind in 1885. To James Billson he wrote: “It must have occurred to you, as it has to me, that the further our civilization advances upon its present lines, so much the cheaper sort of thing does ‘fame’ become, especially of the literary sort.”

These lines, written just three years before he began *Billy Budd,* sound remarkably like the Melville who more than thirty years before had said of Pierre: “The brightest success, now seemed intolerable to him, since he so plainly saw, that the brightest success could not be the sole offspring of Merit; but of Merit for the one thousandth part, and nine hundred and ninety-nine combining and dovetailing accidents for the rest . . .”

Matthiessen, in discussing the aging Melville and his *Billy Budd,* significantly speaks of the effects of the Gilded Age on the thinking of American writers. He refers to John Jay Chapman’s “protesting against the conservative legalistic dryness that characterized our educated class,” and Henry Adams, who “knew that it [the educated class] tended too much towards the analytic mind, that it lacked juices.” Vere answers the description of an educated man characterized by legalistic dryness.

10 Freeman says of the aged Melville: “He was not embittered. He was polite, old, independent, and busy. He had not forgotten his works. He was still writing them” (*op. cit.*, p. 11).

11 Mumford, *op. cit.*, p. 344. Despite this observation, Mumford, too, believes that Melville’s post-Civil War days were “chastened” and “subdued” (p. 325).


In almost all respects, *Billy Budd* is typically Melvillian.\(^{15}\) It is a sea story, Melville's favorite genre. It deals with rebellion. It has reference to reforms, in this case impressment. It is rich in historical background, and concerns ordinary seamen. All those features of *Billy Budd* bear the stamp of the youthful Melville.

In one important respect, however, *Billy Budd* is different from almost all of Melville's other stories. It is written with a cool, detached pen, a seemingly impartial pen.\(^{16}\) This odd development for Melville has had much to do with launching the "acceptance" theory.

In his preface to *Billy Budd*, Melville speaks of the impact of the French Revolution upon the British Navy, and passes both favorable and unfavorable judgment as to its effects. But, in speaking of the sailors and their conditions of life—Melville's strongest interest—he says:

... it was something caught from the Revolutionary Spirit that at Spithead emboldened the man-of-war's men to rise against real abuses ... the Great Mutiny [later at Nore], though by Englishmen naturally deemed monstrous at the time, doubtless gave the first latent prompting to most important reforms in the British Navy.

Thus the scene is set, and though Melville uses a cool pen, he is the Melville of old; his heart still beats quickly for the men in the heat and sweat of the hold.\(^{17}\)

The main character of the piece, Billy Budd, is regarded judiciously by Melville. He is "at least in aspect" the "Handsome Sailor ... a superior figure of [his] own class [accepting] the spontaneous homage of his shipmates ... a nautical Murat" perhaps. He could be "Ashore ... the champion; afloat the spokesman; on every suitable occasion always foremost." *Billy Budd* could be all these things, but he fails actually to become them. Physically he is well suited for the role, but he is found wanting mentally. Unperceptive, in fear of authority, extremely naïve, suffering the tragic fault of a

\(^{15}\) Mumford, op. cit., p. 338, says: "Billy Budd contain[s] the earlier themes of ... [Melville's] life, now transformed and resolved."

\(^{16}\) Melville had once before used a seemingly impartial pen. "Benito Cereno" is a tale of irony.

\(^{17}\) It is instructive to observe how Melville reworked his background source, *The Naval History of Great Britain*, by the British naval historian, William James, into a defense of the mutinying sailors at Spithead and Nore (Freeman, op. cit., pp. 39-40).
stammer in moments of stress, Billy Budd cannot qualify as a 
spokesman. Melville lets us know this early in the story, and keeps reminding us that “welkin-eyed” Billy is nicknamed “Baby Budd,” and is “young and tender” with a “lingering adolescent expression.” He is “a novice in the complexities of factious life,” so simple-minded that when asked by an officer about his place of birth, he replies, “Please, Sir, I don’t know. . . . But I have heard that I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man’s door in Bristol.” Melville warns us that Billy Budd “is not presented as a conventional hero.”

Melville regards Billy fondly, admiringly in many respects, but critically. He reminds us of Billy’s limitations throughout the tale, so when Billy utters those famous words, “God bless Captain Vere,” the reader should be qualified to evaluate those words in the mouth of the speaker.

Billy is an ironic figure, as is Captain Vere. Scholarly, retiring, ill at ease with people, “Starry” Vere is in command of a ship at war. Painfully aware of the evil in Claggart, and pronouncing Billy’s killing of him the blow of an “angel,” Vere nevertheless forces through the death sentence against Billy. A student of philosophy, he ironically rules out all inquiry into the motives for Billy’s act and insists that he be tried for striking and killing a petty officer, an approach that can only result in Billy’s hanging under the naval code. At heart a kind man, Vere, strange to say, makes possible the depraved Claggart’s wish—the destruction of Billy. “God bless Captain Vere!” Is this not piercing irony? As innocent Billy utters these words, does not the reader gag? The injustice of Billy’s hanging is heightened by his ironic blessing of the ironic Vere.

Herein lies the literary importance of the tale. The aged Melville had developed a new weapon in his lifelong fight against injustice. Charles R. Anderson put it very well:

The earlier Melville would have railed against the “evil” of such a system [the hanging of Billy], and the “inhumanity” of Vere being willing to serve as a vehicle of it. . . . This is the wonder, the thing that makes Billy Budd significant, since Melville discovered so little along
this line—that irony is a subtler and finer device for the fiction writer than headlong attack on social abuses.\footnote{From his critical comments upon reading this paper. Professor Anderson had begun approaching the irony in \textit{Billy Budd} in his article, \textit{"The Genesis of Billy Budd," American Literature}, XII, 329-346 (Nov., 1940).}

\textit{Billy Budd} gives us added proof of Melville's great capacity for growth as a writer. However, his development of a new tool had its ironic counterpart in Melville criticism; many critics mistook Melville's irony for a change in his thinking, rather than a richer development in his craft.

F. Barron Freeman, rejecting the "Testament of acceptance" theory, has substituted the "Recognition of necessity" theory. In an intensive study of the aged Melville's thought, Freeman finds "a calm acceptance of the necessity of earthly imperfection and original sin." In Billy, Freeman sees a "Christian hero" practicing resignation and achieving final, heavenly reward. To Freeman the "importance . . . in the tale of \textit{Billy Budd} lies in the optimistic way in which it suggests an acceptance of Fate."\footnote{Freeman, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 115-124.}

Thus it becomes clear that Freeman's "Recognition of necessity" theory is not greatly different from the older "Testament of acceptance" theory. In both cases the rebellious Melville ends his days "chastened and subdued." Gone are the mad tossings of the \textit{Pequod}, moored are the homesick soliloquies of Starbuck, in ashes are the beautiful wild fires of the "hot old man," Ahab. The aged Melville became reconciled. To Watson, Weir, Mumford, Sedgwick, and Thorp, it was achieved in bitterness. To Freeman it came happily in a rediscovery of traditional religious faith. In finally approving "the religious concept of earthly imperfection and heavenly goodness" the old sea dog had found his comfortable niche at the ancestral hearth. But Melville's complex tale offers a quite different theme for analysis as well.\footnote{Since this paper was begun, one critic has attacked the "Testament of acceptance" theory, while another has attacked Freeman's "Recognition of necessity" theory. Richard Chase says: '. . . it is my impression that Melville made his definitive moral statement in \textit{Moby Dick}, \textit{The Confidence Man}, and \textit{Clarel}, and that the moral situation in \textit{Billy Budd} is deeply equivocal." See his article, "Dissent on Billy Budd," \textit{Partisan Review}, XV, 1212-1218 (Nov., 1948). Alfred Kazin, discussing Freeman's interpretation, says: "F. Barron Freeman . . . . tries to blunt Melville's sharp edge. . . . did Melville make through Billy's rapturous death an affirmation of Christian belief? . . . . In 'Billy Budd,' he [Melville] had obviously agreed to accept the whole mysterious creation at last, with the weariness of an old man for whom all questions of justice end in death. . . . But it does not follow from this that he forgave God for just possibly not existing." See his review, "Ishmael in His Academic Heaven," \textit{New Yorker}, Feb. 12, 1949, 84-89.}
Freeman sees in "the calm description of Billy's ascension" Melville's considered judgment of "hope and triumph in death..."21 Again, style, tone, and form are mistaken for content. For Billy's triumph is not personal; it is social, and so of this world.

As Billy stands on deck with the rope around his neck, "A meek shy light appeared in the East, where stretched a diaphanous fleece of white furrowed vapor. That light slowly waxed...." About to die, Billy, who could not conceive of malice or ill will, offers his humble benediction to Vere. And here the main point of Melville's ironic tale is revealed. The sailors, brought on deck to witness the hanging, echo Billy's words. "Without volition as it were, as if indeed the ship's populace were the vehicles of some vocal current electric, with one voice from slow to aloft, came a resonant sympathetic echo—'God bless Captain Vere.'" But this is not intended for Vere, for: "yet at that instant Billy alone must have been in their hearts, even as he was in their eyes." The men blessed Billy, not Vere, with the words "God bless Captain Vere." Though hanged as a criminal, Billy is lovingly remembered for his martyrdom. The bluejackets keep track of the spar from which Billy was suspended. "Knowledge followed it from ship to dock-yard and again from dock-yard to ship, still pursuing it even when at last reduced to a mere dock-yard boom. To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross." Billy dies in helpless defeat only to become ironically reincarnated as a living symbol for all sailors.

And finally Billy is immortalized in a ballad composed by his shipmates. It is a tender ballad, mournful and affectionate, and sings of identification of all sailors with Billy.

... Through the port comes the moon-shine astray!
... But 'twill die in the dawning of Billy's last day.
A jewel-block they'll make of me to-morrow,
... Like the ear-drop I gave to Bristol Molly—
... Sure, a messmate will reach me the last parting cup;
... Heaven knows who will have the running of me up!
... But Donald he has promised to stand by the plank;
So I'll shake a friendly hand ere I sink.
... Sentry, are you there?
Just ease these darbies at the wrist,
And roll me over fair.
I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.

21 Freeman, op. cit., pp. 125-126.
Thus Billy becomes—under Melville’s ironic pen—something he never intended becoming: a symbol to all bluejackets of their hardship and camaraderie. He stammered in life, but spoke clearly in death.

So ends Melville’s last book, with the sailors singing “Billie in the Darbies,” honoring him as one of their own. In this song Melville sings to bewildered Wellingsborough of Redburn; to Jack Chase, the Great Heart of White-Jacket; to Steelkilt of Moby-Dick, to all the breathing, bleeding characters he ever put on paper.

In Billy Budd, Melville presents a picture of depravity subduing virtue, but not silencing it. Billy is sacrificed, but his ballad-singing mates seize upon this as a symbol of their lives. They never accepted natural depravity as victor, and they lived to see the end of impressment.

Melville knew that. He wrote the story of mutinies in the British Navy almost a full century after they took place. He had the tremendous advantage of historical perspective, a fact almost all critics have overlooked. By 1888 one could correctly evaluate the events of 1797. Melville could appreciate the legacy of the impressed Billy Budds and their mates: “the Great Mutiny, though by Englishmen naturally deemed monstrous at the time, doubtless gave the first latent prompting to most important reforms in the British Navy.”

Billy Budd, forcibly removed from the ship Rights-of-Man, helped bring the rights of man to the seamen of His Majesty’s Navy. His shipmates aboard H.M.S. Indomitable made this possible, along with the generations of seafaring men who followed.