THE PROBLEM OF BILLY BUDD

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WHEN a monumental new edition of Billy Budd appeared in 1962, it was the hope of the editors that their exhaustive scholarship might contribute to a definitive interpretation of the novel. Such a wish might seem unnecessarily restrictive, but the extreme critical divergence on Billy Budd has created a genuine threat to its artistic integrity as a result of its apparent failure to support a demonstrable reading. This essay is an attempt to end the war, or to make the end more predictable.

Let it be clear at the outset that I am not proposing to limit the range of parallel and compatible interpretations. Billy Budd is sufficiently complex to present the many-layered phenomenon which criticism rightly expects in a fine work of art. The kind of imaginative but disciplined discussion which has been generated by, say, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is constructive and I have no quarrel with it. The kind which will not do and which this study is expressly committed to combat is the kind that has plagued The Turn of the Screw: a factious dialog between two mutually exclusive points of view, one of which is more ingenious than the other but less soundly supported by the available evidence in and out of the text.¹

Fundamentally, the problem of Billy Budd is not unlike that of Ivan Karamazov’s youthful article on ecclesiastical government, which was taken to favor both churchmen and atheists and finally suspected of “impudent satirical burlesque.” Billy Budd has been read as a parable of God the Father sacrificing His Son for a fallen world, and alternatively of Pontius Pilate selling out Jesus for present and personal convenience; and finally its sober voice has been taken for a dry mock protesting God and the whole created scheme of things. As in the case of Ivan’s article, the problem hinges largely on the question of tone, though there are crucial points of substance and reasoning to be considered as well. The issues are intricately interconnected, since after all what we have to deal with is meaning in an organic work of art; but in as orderly a manner as possible I shall try to analyze the causes of critical error, as they appear to me, and then to show, by examining first the tone of the novel and then its ethical logic, that the plainest reading of this disputed book is the only valid reading possible.

I. Delusions

A good starting point for this conservative case was provided several years ago by Richard Harter Fogle, who identified two “heresies” of Billy Budd criticism and dismissed them with entire justification, in my opinion, but without the formal refutation evidently needed to lay such stubborn ghosts.² He complained of the widespread attribution to Melville of an ironic tone resulting in a sardonic reversal of the story’s ostensible meaning; and he complained particularly of Lawrence Thompson’s invention (in Melville’s Quarrel with God) of a quasi-authorial narrator in whose “bland” and “stupid” vision the apparent straightforwardness of the narration may be conveniently discounted. Thompson’s idea is spectacular enough to deserve special mention, but it is basically the ironist heresy tricked out with a supporting device which no other ironist has been clever enough to bring to his case. In effect, it only postpones the collapse of the case by one step, because there is no evidence that such a mediator between author and reader exists. Despite Wayne Booth’s proper insistence on every author’s “undramatized narrator” or “implicit second self,”³ never altogether identical with the man behind the mask of art, a considerable burden of proof falls on the claim that these psychic twins are militantly opposed, and the obligation is not discharged by showing that the alter ego must be present if the meaning of the novel is to be reversed. Thompson’s argument is simply circular and would perhaps have raised more general objection than it has if he had not invented also an “alert reader” who always adopts his views and

¹Alexander Jones’s admirable survey of this familiar quarrel in “Point of View in The Turn of the Screw,” PMLA, LXXIV (March 1959), 112–122, is a model of corrective criticism. See also Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961), pp. 311–315.

²By now any scholarly reassessment of works like these carries a Bunyanesque burden of prior study which it is impractical to spread out for detailed inspection, even in footnotes. The latest annotated text of Billy Budd, edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts (Chicago, 1962), to which this study refers throughout, lists 161 items in its bibliography, and a selection of this material edited by William Stafford under the title Melville’s Billy Budd and the Critics (San Francisco, 1961) lists nearly a hundred in addition to the twenty-odd it wholly or partly reprints. Between these sources (most concisely the former, pp. 24–27) tell all that the average reader of the novel or of this essay will want to know about the Billy Budd controversy. In the interest of progress and brevity I shall omit a good deal of the argument and formal documentation accessible in these compendia.

with whom one is instinctively reluctant to disassociate himself. The real issue lies behind this little smoke screen: are we to take Melville at his word innocence in a "man-of-war world," or are we to find beneath its tragic benediction a satiric attack on the complacency of earthly and heavenly authority?

Since the latter reading would render the novel, in Fogle's words, "cheap, puerile, and perverse" (witness Pierre), no one entertained that possibility until, in 1930, one adventurous essay^3 loosened a spate of ironist interpretations from the scholarly presses. The reasons for this, I am convinced, must be sought in the critics and their milieu rather than in the book. Wayne Booth makes the valuable point that a book tends to mean what we expect it to mean, and "the last several decades have produced—for whatever reasons—an audience that has been thrown off balance by a barrage of ironic works."^4 Irony-hunting has joined symbol-hunting as a fashionable indoor sport, which has so conditioned us to the expectation of obliquity and ambiguity that, as Booth says, "We can't accept a straight and simple statement when we read one." The popular mystique of close reading inclines us to see weasels in clouds and exposes contemporary criticism to what Plinlimmon would have called "strange, unique follies and sins." The most conspicuous of these in reading Melville is mistaking an occasional romantic petulance of temper for a considered philosophic posture.

In fact, our expectations of Melville constitute as real a source of error as did the very different predictions of his contemporaries. For them he was "the man who lived among the cannibals," and the leap from Typee to Saddle Meadows, or even to the try-works, was too much for them. For us he is the voice of Ahab and the Confidence-Man, the sayer of "No! in thunder." We easily forget that the nay-saying he praised was Hawthorne's and not Beckett's or Sartre's, and that the remark was not made in Billy Budd or within thirty years of it. The ironist critics are at least partly disabled by the same prejudice that afflicts the anti-Stratfordians: the man in their minds could not possibly have written this work.

Reinforcing the idée fixe about the author is an equally powerful preconception of the characters in Billy Budd. The norms of the novel and the rhetoric that expresses them are clear enough in themselves, but they encounter resistance in the natural interests and sympathies of the reader. Booth has commented on the force in literature of "our irresistible sympathy for the innocent victim,"^8 a sympathy so strongly generated by "Baby Budd" as to tempt the most wary of us (in Merlin Bowen's words) "to risk the luxury of at least following our own conscience."^7 Abetting this reaction is the equal and opposite inclination against Captain Vere. Melville, as I shall try to show, made Vere as attractive as he could in the face of his official austerity; but Billy, just as he stands, is an American Adam, loved from the start, and fit to be forgiven anything after he has struck his sacrificial blow at oppressive authority. We must resent his judge, irrespective of the merits of the case, on precisely the ground Melville once supposed to underlie the popular opinion of God: "The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust his heart, and fancy him all brain like a watch."^8 It is belief rather than disbelief which it is difficult to suspend in such a story as Billy Budd. Yet to be ruled by indignation, however righteous, is to subvert tragedy to melodrama. It happens to every freshman who lets himself be carried away by the "injured innocence" of Oedipus into the mistake of casting the oracle as villain. It is instructive to reflect on the critical abuse Billy Budd would deservedly draw if it really said what the ironists claim it says. Weltenschmerz has never had much survival value as art.

Several allied faults of interpretation, more logical than emotional, though perhaps emotionally conditioned, may be briefly added to the indictment. Most basic is the rejection of donnée, the refusal to honor the author's proffered coin of meaning. The critic with a thesis to prove or with simply a sophisticated aversion to the obvious—pandemic in our time—can follow the bent of his ingenuity to any predetermined conclusion, undeterred by patent narrative facts often reinforced by pointed authorial comment. Reviewing the notorious Turn of the Screw case, Wayne Booth hangs between amusement and dismay, "wishing for more signs of respect for standards of proof" (p. 315). One characteristic misuse of evidence in Billy Budd criticism is reasoning categorically from

^ The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 366. The entire section labeled (after Saul Bellow) "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!" is worth reading on this topic.
^ Ibid., p. 132. Booth is referring here specifically to Joyce's Portrait of the Artist, but the problem of sympathy is explored at large in Chs. v, ix, and x.
^ Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter (Chicago, 1960), p. 233. The full case against the argument from conscience will be made from another point of view further on.
^ Letter to Hawthorne, June 1851.
prior works. *White-Jacket*, because of obvious resemblances in character and setting, has been a fertile field for such deductions. Since the *Somers* affair of 1842 is one of the sources of *Billy Budd* (though by no means the primary one, as once supposed), a condemnation of it in *White-Jacket* as "murder" has been taken as symptomatic of Melville's attitude toward it in *Billy Budd*. In the later book, however, the purpose and context of the citation (Ch. xxi) are totally different: what was once a loaded exhibit in a reform polemic is now "history, and here cited without comment," to illustrate the exigencies of naval command. In the same way, Billy's response to punitive flogging is read in the light of the sensational attack on naval discipline in *White-Jacket*, while more moderate and pertinent references in both the early fiction and the late verse are ignored. The correctives are many and evident, not the least of them the differences among these works as art. *White-Jacket*, like all the early books (until well into *Moby-Dick*), has a fully dramatized narrator with his own created opinions, attitudes, and purposes; *Billy Budd* is narrated by an unmediated author who, unlike Chaucer, gives no hint that his "wit is short" or his artistic distance great. More defendable is reasoning from the poems, which both time and rhetoric link closely with *Billy Budd*; and both of the studies I have seen making such comparisons conclude as I do that Melville's tone in this last novel was affirmative and his point of view conservative.

Most pervasive of the fallacies I have noticed in the *Billy Budd* literature is the confusion of dramatic facts with the personal views of author or reader. The whole "testament" controversy is shot through with this flaw or the threat of it—the danger, that is, of allowing no artistic distance at all in the narrative or of imposing on the fiction one's own norms in place of those provided, implicitly or explicitly, by the author. Much print has been devoted to the problem of whether Billy's benediction to Captain Vere expresses Melville's feeling or its opposite. Since Billy is an imaginary figure in an imaginary situation contrived by a professional novelist who plainly labels the cry "conventional," there is no reason to suppose that the question is even relevant. In the case of Vere, as much time has been wasted agitating the question of whether the reader would have acted as he did, or whether Captain Mackenzie of the *Somers* did so, or whether naval law (British of 1797? American of 1842? or 1888?) required a commander to act in such a way—all matters having nothing to do with the self-consistency of the fictional character in question.

II. Tone

The assumption that a fictional character can be taken as a reliable spokesman for his author is boggy ground to build on. Yet somewhere within every successful fiction there must be adequate clues to that much-disputed but still indispensable value, the author's intention. What I mean by intention, let it be clear, is not belief but tone—that is, the belief-making mechanism of the story as we have it. Does the author's apparent attitude invite acceptance or rejection of the value system on which the story is based?

Some of the critical confusion which has beclouded *Billy Budd* has arisen out of an initial failure to define the "irony" which is supposed to throw its belief-making mechanism into reverse. So far as I know, R. H. Fogle is the only commentator to have illuminated this crucial point by observing that while *Billy Budd* is ironic enough in the Aristotelian sense (reversal of fortune, the "irony of fate"), it is not ironic in the rhetorical sense (reversal of meaning, the irony of satire). Unhappily, the presence or absence of this latter irony is difficult to prove, and proof has so far been largely limited to assertion and counter-assertion. The critic peers into the text and sees, like Thurber at the microscope, his own eye. It helps, but it does not solve all problems, to say that irony is grounded in absurdity. In much contemporary literature absurdity is the norm, and even in fiction based on traditional norms the author's notion of what is out of joint, or his way of expressing it, may differ sharply from the reader's. One can only inspect what clues the text provides with an impartial eye and in the perspective of a scale of values as nearly exempt from the dangers of subjective manipulation as possible.

Much of the textual scrutiny has already been done piecemeal and only needs to be reviewed here. There is first the fact of the novel's dedication to Jack Chase—simple, direct, reverent, memorializing the "great heart" of the most admirable man Melville had ever met. It may be, as Warner Berthoff has proposed, that this theme of...
magnanimity is the central strain of the narrative; at the very least it provides a keynote unmistakable in its sincerity and quite lacking in the ironic potential of the dedication of *Pierre* to Mount Greylock or of *Israel Potter* to the Bunker Hill monument.

This keynote is consistently echoed in Melville's portrayal of his principals. Capping his introductory sketch of Captain Vere in Chapter vii, Melville emphasizes that natures like Vere's are rare in that "honesty prescribes to them directness." Characterizing the common seaman in Chapter xvi he writes with simple nostalgia of the "old-fashioned sailor" whose "frankness" stands in contrast to the landsman's "finesse," "long head," "indirection," and "distrustfulness." In describing the life ashore Melville anticipates our popular concept of gamesmanship: "an oblique, tedious, barren game hardly worth that poor candle burnt out in playing it." In the following chapter he appeals for acceptance of his simple protagonist by disarming the anticipated skepticism of the sophisticated reader and demanding in its place "something else than mere shrewdness." His only devious and ironic character is the villain Claggart, and to him he has Captain Vere say, "Be direct, man." Here, in short, is an internal scale of values as poorly contrived to nourish an ironic tone as can well be imagined.13

As the story develops, it becomes steadily plain that the irony is all in the case and not in the author's attitude toward it. Into his climactic episode in Chapter xxii Melville built a classic Aristotelian irony by which "innocence and guilt... changed places" and it became a fact as unalterable as the parricide of Oedipus that Billy had killed an officer in performance (however badly) of his duty. Then, in the next breath, Melville extended his *donnée* to include the inevitable judgment of the captain, who "was not authorized to determine the matter on [the] primitive basis of essential right and wrong." At the end of the chapter, as a further inducement to our acceptance of that decision, he appended a warning to the "snug card players in the cabin" not to pass judgment on the actions "under fire" of "the sleepless man on the bridge." In the face of such rhetoric one might rather expect to find an author reproached for excessive explicitness than debated as an enigma.

On the other hand, if it seems impossible for the ironists to be right, it is not wholly their fault that they are wrong. The seal of reconciliation which the condemned Billy is made to place upon his captain's intransigent sentence is mystical and as hard to accept as the forgiveness of Christ on the cross. On such a scene as their final interview in Chapter xxii, the author felt obliged to draw the curtain and to content himself with hinting at the passionate consonance supposed to have welled up in the spirits of these two "phenomenal" natures. His allusion to them as Abraham and Isaac is a clue to both his sincerity and his difficulty. The originals are accepted (when they are accepted) by a suspension of disbelief in which poetic faith is immeasurably assisted by religious faith. Melville can only invoke his biblical counterparts by allusion and hope for the best. That he fears the worst, however, is apparent from the nervous manner in which he reminds us of the "rarer qualities" in the natures of his "Abraham" and "Isaac"—"so rare indeed as to be all but incredible to average minds however much cultivated." This is diffidence, and well founded, but not irony. Melville is not mocking belief but pleading for it. The ironists are simply those readers with whom his appeal has failed.

Finally we must consider the sources of what dubious testimony he allowed to stand in his manuscript. It is notable that all the reservations about Vere are held by minor characters with patently inferior vision: his fellow officers, whose imputations of pedantry must be written off to professional jealousy; the surgeon, whose suspicions of his captain's sanity are an almost comical reflection of his own lack of information, involvement, and insight;14 the chaplain, who is presumed to disapprove the sentence on grounds of higher morality but who lacks perception or authority to influence the course of events. Melville's attitude toward this chaplain is instructive. We are not to hold the clergyman accountable, we are told, for his failure to protest Billy's sentence, since such a protest would have been both "idle as invoking the desert" and "an audacious transgression of the bounds of his function." On the other hand, the idea of a chaplain on a warship is treated as an absurdity—"incongruous as a musket would be on the altar at Christmas." The contrast in tone is palpable: Melville is struck by the irony of the chaplain's institutional or symbolic presence, but not by his personal sufferance of the double standard he is anomalously bound to. This is not the Melville who once pilloried clerical hypocrisy in the Rev. Mr. Falsgrave, but it is a pos-

13 Some of this very evidence is used by Wayne Booth, p. 178, in citing *Billy Budd* as an example of "reliable" narration.

14 Cf. Shaw's *Candida*, in which everyone thinks everyone else "mad" for precisely these reasons.
sibly more mature writer for whom the eternal dilemma of man's dual allegiance is not resolved by romantic gestures.

Outside the text itself, the search for tone is reduced to conjecture. The ironists have tried to deduce from Melville's earlier writings what his attitude might have been in this one. It seems to me at least as legitimate to apply the touchstone method instead, holding up to *Billy Budd* parallel passages from works by other authors in which the intention is not in doubt, and in this way confining the problem to purely rhetorical grounds.

From the outer limit of the ironic scale we may take a piece of gross satire like *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* by Johnson Jones Hooper (1845, reprinted 1846, 1848, 1881). The tone of this book is signaled by the moral code of its frontier anti-hero: "It is good to be shifty in a new country." Suggs cheats his way through a series of escapades, two of which were borrowed by Mark Twain for *Huckleberry Finn,* and another of which (Ch. viii) bears enough resemblance to the crucial episode of *Billy Budd* to provide a measure of extreme contrast in tone. As self-appointed captain of the "Tallapoosa Volunteers," Suggs impounds a motley group of frightened civilians, declares martial law, and threatens to shoot anyone who fails to "walk the chalk." When a harmless widow sneaks out for a pinch of tobacco, Suggs convenes a drum-head court, seconded by his next-in-command ("Lewtenants ought allers to think jist as their captings do"), and terrorizes the old lady with a death sentence, ultimately commuted to a $25 fine. His addresses to court and culprit neatly parody Vere's: "It's a painful duty, Lewtenant! a very painful duty, Lewtenant Snipes; and very distressin'. But the rules of war are very strict, you know! . . . And officers must do their duty, come what may. [And to the widow] It ain't me that's a-gwine to kill you; it's the Rules of War . . . You've 'fessed the crime, . . . and ef me and the Lewtenant wanted to let you off ever so bad, the rules of war would lay us liable ef we was to." Any comparison of such outlandish farce with *Billy Budd* may seem impertinent, but, apart from dialect, nothing really separates them except the absurdity built into Hooper's story by a conscious and exploited incongruity between word and fact.

Vere is sometimes treated as if he were a Simon Suggs: either hypocritical, in not really believing what he says, or cowardly, in not daring to break the rules. This is not so much, I think, because Vere himself is misunderstood as because Melville's world is mistaken for Hooper's, in which there is no real moral dilemma at all—in which what poses as moral dilemma is plainly the crowning absurdity of the whole affair. But there is nothing inherently absurd either in the dilemma Vere faces or in the choice he makes, as a very different sort of touchstone may illustrate.

In Chapter xxv of Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* the central character, an erstwhile Communist named Pietro Spina, hears a confession of political duplicity from a young revolutionary torn between conflicting loyalties. Though he is no longer an active leader in the movement, it is significant that Spina makes no judgment on the boy's conduct without first defining the ethical posture from which he must speak:

"If I were head of a party, or of a political group, . . . I would have to judge you according to the party's rules. Every party has its morality, codified in rules. These rules are often very close to those which moral sentiment inspires in every man; but they are sometimes the precise opposite. . . . But here and now I am just an ordinary man, and if I must judge another man I can be guided only by my conscience."

Compare the statement of Melville's Vere from the alternative position:

"Do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. . . . We fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but a coincidence. . . . For [martial] law and the vigor of it, we are not responsible. . . . Tell me whether or not, occupying the position we do, private conscience should not yield to that imperial one formulated in the code under which alone we officially proceed?"

The rhetoric, in context, is decisive. If an author's intention is to ridicule the *Organization Man* for his lack of independence, he will sound something like this: "The Roman sword would never have conquered the world if the grand fabric of Roman Law had not been elaborated to save the man behind the sword from having to think for himself. In the same way the British Empire is the outcome of College and School discipline and of the Church Catechism."

Nothing resembling this tone is to be found in either Silone or Melville. On the contrary, both were at pains to create strikingly non-conformist characters, so independent as to be dramatically isolated from the mass of men.

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But the character of Billy has troubled the dissenting critics as much as that of Vere. After all, they reason, Melville did make his Handsome Sailor a kind of Christ figure, innocent of blood lust if not of blood, and could hardly have contemplated such a fate as Billy’s without giving it, however subtly, the colors of legal murder. Again, my denial of this view may be defended by a comparison of Melville’s story with a parallel tale which is clearly activated by irony. The rhetorical contrast must speak for itself. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the story of Richard (“a charming pamphlet, translated from the French”) is recounted by Ivan to his brother Alyosha as part of the psychological preparation for the shattering ironic legend of the Grand Inquisitor. Richard, a foundling, brutalized by circumstance, drifts into murder as a young man and is promptly condemned to die for it. (“There are no sentimentalists there,” Dostoevsky’s narrator remarks.) Once in jail, Richard is suddenly showered with all the benevolent attentions formerly withheld by the Christian society that ruined and doomed him; and in the end, converted, repentant, and limp with fear, he faces death parroting: “This is my happiest day. I am going to the Lord!” Then, says Ivan, “covered with his brothers’ kisses, Richard is dragged to the scaffold. . . . And they chopped off his head in a brotherly fashion, because he had found grace.”

There is moral absurdity, and there is the rhetoric of irony by which it is effectively exposed. I contend that Melville chose not to use such rhetoric because the story he had to tell was not morally absurd.

III. Ethics

Although no one piece of evidence on the norms of the novel is conclusive, the most compelling to my mind is a passage in Chapter vii citing Montaigne as one of Vere’s favorite authors. In this fact we have not only Montaigne’s philosophical posture to guide us, but Vere’s reasons for approving it as well, reinforced by Melville’s own recorded opinions on the subject. The case has not been made in detail, and it is one that deserves a full hearing. The heart of the matter, as a recent pioneer study has indicated, is that Montaigne had an overriding respect for law, however fallible, as against personal judgment, which he held to be still more fallible: “Private reason has only a private jurisdiction.” To this central point the argument constantly returns and refers.

The effort to see Vere’s thought through Montaigne’s, however, runs into paradox directly when we read that what Vere got from the philosopher was “settled convictions, . . . a dike against [the] invading waters of novel opinion.” This may be thought to smack of rigidity quite alien to the open-mindedness of the skeptic whose motto was “Que sais-je?” Rigidity is in fact the chief stick Vere’s critics like to beat him with. But what Vere responds to in Montaigne, Melville makes clear, is not opinions but an attitude—honest, realistic, “free from cant and convention”; a mind not lacking in principles, but proof against convictions resulting from habit thinking and interested motives. Montaigne argued, on the one hand, the kind of moral relativism which Melville saw in Hamlet’s remark that “nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so,” and on the other hand the supreme wisdom of ordering human conduct by fixed principles—“always to will the same things, and always to oppose the same things.”

He was of course aware that the will cannot always be just, and for precisely that reason he insisted that men must live by definite laws superior to the will. These laws, it is important to understand, are civil statutes, “still supremely the laws of conscience, which we say are born of nature” but which in fact “are born of custom.”

This distinction, pervasive in Montaigne, may be further instanced in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” (ii. xii), from which Melville had earlier taken one of his whaling extracts for *Moby-Dick*. Here he stresses the common basis of all law in “possession and usage,” that is, custom. And custom, like a river, takes its force from growth, beginning in insignificance but ending in sometimes irresistible power (p. 440). This, for
Montaigne, was the current of civilization, the organized movement of society, which ought to define the general course of a man’s moral life through the laws which describe it. The alternative was ethical anarchy: “If it is from ourselves that we derive the ruling of our conduct, into what confusion do we cast ourselves!” (p. 436).

Earlier in the same essay (p. 419) he quotes Epicurus and Plato on the necessity of laws, that even the worst of them are needed to keep men from eating one another; and the remark is reminiscent of Hobbes, another philosopher whom Melville quoted on whales and who may have influenced his thinking. In the Leviathan laws are pictured as the “reason and will” of the social body; without their indispensable controls the life of man becomes, in the famous phrase, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In his biting critique of ideal morality Hobbes uses Melville’s very image of the unordered society, the “man-of-war world”: men unchecked by civil power “are in that condition which is called war.” Society can survive only when its members “reduce their wills unto one will” in a surrender of moral sovereignty which presupposes the unreliability of private conscience and the necessity of some personal sacrifice for the general welfare. For Hobbes the exercise of private judgment in social decisions is tantamount to the state of “war” which exists when there are no public norms at all. Quite possibly Melville arrived at this conclusion independently, but the Leviathan, if only coincidentally, illuminates the tragic predicament of Captain Vere, caught between two warring worlds, one armed by legal tyranny and the other by legal anarchy. Melville criticism has given much sentimental attention to the former, and with reasons obviously shared by Vere; but it is the latter which the philosopher in him fears more profoundly and is doomed to fear alone.

The reader who dismisses Vere as a shallow formalist is taking part of Melville’s donnée for the whole. When Vere proclaims his unalterable allegiance to the King’s “buttons,” it is possible to think of him simply as a man in a sailer suit, “accustomed,” as Melville describes the species in Chapter xvi, “to obey orders without debating them.” What must be kept in mind is the hard prior debate inside “Starry” Vere which could alone persuade a thoughtful man to don the King’s buttons in the first place. What was threatened in the Nore Mutiny, Melville reminds us in Chapter iii, was not just naval authority but “the flag of founded law and freedom defined.” It is this symbol to which Vere has sworn his difficult allegiance, an allegiance reaffirmed in his disputed reflections at the close of Chapter xxvii on the human need for “measured forms.” Like Hobbes, Vere sees unbridled man as a beast, and law (in Melville’s provocative image) as “Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood.”

Legality as music is a figure seemingly out of keeping with the harsh spirit of that “child of War,” the Mutiny Act. Yet in a world in which mutiny is a serviceable metaphor for the moral and theological condition of man, an imposed order is the only kind that is possible, and the articles under which Captain Vere takes his authority are not radically different from those under which Moses took his. With respect to the taking of life, neither the military nor the biblical statute goes beyond a general prohibition. The extenuations of circumstance, as Melville well knew, are as infinitely adjustable as the “Protean easy-chair” of the Confidence-Man, built to “ease human suffering [by] endlessly changeable accommodations” in which “the most tormented conscience must, somehow and somewhere, find rest.” Billy Budd, I contend, was conceived as the kind of story in which such accommodations are not available. It invites comparison in its ethical structure, not to “The Birthmark,” the one tale of Hawthorne to which Melville acknowledged a specific debt, but to The Scarlet Letter. Both stories deal with the collision of private morality and the law in a tight little community which admits no extenuations. They have a number of features in common—a devil figure, self-destroyed; a child of nature, innocent but flawed—but most importantly a central sensibility imprinted on a dilemma precisely defined by the opposition of statutory and romantic law. Billy’s exoneration, like Dimmesdale’s marriage, is made in heaven but can only be recognized there. One irreducible fact gets all but lost in the personal sympathy generated by both characters: no law can sanction the execution of bad officers by their men or the

extra-marital intercourse of clergymen with their parishioners.

Vere has been abused for his instant observation that "the angel must hang," as though he were prejudging Billy and making a mockery of his trial. But it is hard to see how such a sentiment can prevail in any reasoned estimate of the story. If one sees a man commit murder, one knows that he ought to suffer the penalty; and one also knows that in a civilized society the guilt, however obvious, must be determined and the penalty exacted by due process. Vere's remark may sound unsportsmanlike, but it cannot be regarded as unjust. If he blunders at all at this point, it is not in anticipating judgment but in assessing character. Here and here only he displays prejudice: he likes Billy and dislikes Claggart. The reader allows him these feelings because he shares them and has privileged information which justifies them. But Vere does not have this information and decides on intuition alone that he has seen an "Ananias... struck dead by an angel of God." If Claggart were a sympathetic character, our indignation would be justly turned against the superior who treated him with peremptory contempt, was prepared to take a subordinate's word against his, and laid him open to a judgment which not only preceded but precluded trial. The death of Claggart is exactly like that of a soldier Montaigne tells of in "Of Conscience" (II.v), whose stomach was cut open to determine whether he had stolen food as charged. It appeared that he had, but, as Montaigne ironically remarked, what "an instructive condemnation!"

Unwittingly Vere misleads us in the direction of allegory. His word "angel" too effectively polarizes the principals of the drama in his cabin. It is a touch of romance which we can surely forgive in a character sometimes thought to lack heart; but it increases difficulty for both himself and the reader. Forgetting the patent symbolism of Billy's stammer and the reality of the crime it makes him commit, and ignoring Melville's explicit disclaimer of romantic intentions (end of Chapter ii), we are apt to mistake a human tragedy for the Death of Innocence in a morality play. And the tendency is aggravated by an equal and opposite gravitation, dramatized by the officers of the court, toward compromise rather than categorical decision in the matter of punishment. What shouldn't happen to a dog is happening to an "angel," and we quarrel with that ungenial part of the author's donnée expressed in Vere's indubitable mandate to "condemn or let go."27

All of the problems of Billy Budd somehow converge on the fundamental issue of absolute versus relative values. Most of Melville's critics have recognized in his work the uneasy co-existence of anti-Platonism and romantic idealism, and some of them have tried to resolve this discordance by appeal to the Plinlimmon pamphlet in Pierre, the one document in which Melville dealt with it explicitly, if not in his own voice.28 Broadly, the case rests on a presumed correspondence between the alternatives confronting Captain Vere in the judgment of Billy and the two systems of morality predicated by Plotinus Plinlimmon. Plinlimmon's "chronometrical" or heavenly morality is supposed to be the same as Vere's "natural law" or the "last assizes" at which Billy will be acquitted; and the contrasting "horological" or earthly morality is equated with the martial or statutory law by which Billy is condemned. The inference is that the chronometrical standard is an ideal of universal perfection to which Vere has not the courage to aspire, and the horological a temporizing expedient on which he seizes to stay out of trouble.

No doubt the best corrective for this astonishing conclusion is to keep the Plinlimmon pamphlet out of Billy Budd, particularly in view of the uncertainty of its tone; but if it is to continue to raise its head it will have to do an about-face. It is not the law which is partial, local, "horological," but ideal morality. Since the "chronometrical" is a Platonic idea, it can only be imitated, and law is man's imitation of it. Imperfect as it is in operation, law is in principle a universal and absolute good, and it is the only one we have. The higher morality, on the other hand, by which Vere would presumably free Billy or mitigate his punishment, is only a benign expedient by which this killer under these conditions is to be exempted from the normal (and normally correct) judgment. It is, in fact, precisely horological—of this time, of that place. The advocates of absolute morality are pleading Portia's case: "The quality of mercy is not strained." But this means it is not

27 The groundwork which Melville laid for acceptance of Vere's alternatives is most clearly seen in the second paragraph of Chapter xviii, where, as prelude to Claggart's accusation, he describes the dangerous situation of the Bellipotent and the unique qualification of her commander to exercise "prompt initiative" in "unforeseen difficulties."

28 Melville's general opposition to absolutism and idealism is admirably analyzed by Milton Stern in the opening chapter of The Fine-Hammered Steel of Herman Melville (Urbana, Ill., 1957). The Plinlimmon case is most fully argued by Wendell Glick, "Expediency and Absolute Morality in Billy Budd," PMLA, LXXIII (March 1953), 103-110; and James E. Miller, Jr., "Billy Budd: The Catastrophe of Innocence," M.L.N., LXXXIII (March 1958), 165-176.
codified, it is gratuitous, a product of individual will and not susceptible to the disciplines of social architecture. The fact that Portia’s problem was solved by the letter of the law demonstrates what we have to build on.

At bottom the Plinlimmon argument is radically misleading because the analogy is false. As Henry Murray long ago pointed out, there is no rigid dichotomy between real and ideal morality and what discrepancy there is cannot be described by a mathematical differential. An apter image, and one closer to the Melville of Billy Budd, is the one Dostoevsky uses in Ivan Karamazov’s analysis of the same problem. Drawing his figure from geometry rather than chronometry, Ivan describes man’s mind as “Euclidian” and refers to the realms of the ideal and the real as those in which parallel lines do or do not meet (v, iii). Melville evidently had the same idea, and in nearly the same terms, when he warned in Moby-Dick (Ch. xxxv) against the navigator “who offers to ship with the Phaedon instead of Bowditch in his head.” Later, in The Enchantadas (Sketch Second), a similar thought took form as he watched a Galapagos tortoise butting patiently against a mast and saw in its hopeless inflexibility “the curse [of] straightforwardness in a belittered world.” These are figures which keep clear, as the Plinlimmon figure does not, the crucial distinction between expediency and practicality. Seen in this light, Vere’s problem is one of moral navigation, and its solution is dictated by a respect for his charts which is both characteristic and heroic.

IV. A Modern Instance

My plea for straightforwardness in literary criticism may be thought to labor under the curse of the tortoise. In this case, however, it is the “straight” reading which respects the author’s sensitively wrought image of a tragically belittered world. It is not sneering at the great body of Billy Budd criticism to suggest, in conclusion, that it has expressed bewilderment. It is only saying that some very good thinking has chosen very bad grounds. Unlike “The Lady or the Tiger?” Billy Budd was never conceived as a puzzle for our solution or a choice for our decision, but rather as a course of events for our contemplation. Unfortunately, the polemical virus runs strong in the critical battle that has been waged over problematical fictions like Billy Budd and The Turn of the Screw. Out of the whole patchwork of plausibility the only statement that emerges with the sure ring of authorial sincerity is the one that undercuts all the others: “You must not pay too much attention to them. The scriptures are unalterable and the comments often enough merely express the commentator’s bewilderment.”

Enveloping the parable of the doorkeeper Kafka has created a still more relevant parable in the controversy over its meaning. In the crazy gamut of sophistical interpretations which the narrator reviews there is parodied every earnest critical battle that has been waged over problematical fictions like Billy Budd and The Turn of the Screw. Out of the whole patchwork of plausibility the only statement that emerges with the sure ring of authorial sincerity is the one that undercuts all the others: “You must not pay too much attention to them. The scriptures are unalterable and the comments often enough merely express the commentator’s bewilderment.”
ring values. A firm will is needed to remember, with Tindall, that *Billy Budd* is "not a conclusion, like a sermon, [but] a vision of confronting what confronts us, of man thinking things out with all the attendant confusions and uncertainties." This is a Sophoclean Melville in *Billy Budd*, speaking with a detachment and a respect for fact that criticism must emulate if it is to get at his meaning.