THE MEANING OF BILLY BUDD

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Herman Melville died in 1891 when he was still going through the revisions of his **novella Billy Budd.** It was not published until 1924, but after that time it has received continual attention from scholars, in the form of criticism, many revised editions and translations, and from artists who were inspired by it to create new forms of art, such as an opera, a play for the stage and a film. (1)

The plot of the story is simple: Billy, a charmingly innocent foretopman on the **Indomitable,** a British warship, is falsely accused of treason by evil spirited Claggart, the master-at-arms. Unable to answer in words because of a stammer he develops when he is excited, Billy answers in a blow, hitting Claggart on the forehead and causing his immediate death Captain Vere who holds his military duty above every other consideration, condemns Billy to die. In short, this is the story of the sanctioned sacrifice of someone good and beautiful in the name of general welfare.

In spite of all the interest **Billy Budd** has awakened in many perceptive readers, it has kept the mystery of its meaning to this day. Critics of the **novella** have invariably been divided into camps about its meaning. Not only that, but the general trend of criticism about it has often been influenced by changing climates of opinion.

After World War I, when it was first salvaged from complete oblivion (together with Melville's published works), **Billy Budd** was received with great enthusiasm. The prevailing spirit of rebellion against conservatism

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1) The opera **Billy Budd** was composed by Benjamin Britten. E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier wrote the libretto for it. It was produced at Covent Garden in 1951. The play was written by Louis C. Coxe and Robert Chapman. It was made by Peter Ustinov in 1962. Ustinov played Captain Vere, Robert Ryan, Claggart and Terence Stamp, Billy.

led young men of the time to look for kindred spirits in the past and they discovered Melville, the great rebel against cosmic injustice and the defender of primitivism against corrupt institutions of civilization. **Billy Budd** was seen as an ironic expression of helpless anger felt in the face of an established order that had to be maintained at the cost of some totally innocent elements in it. In the person of Billy young men of the 20'ies saw themselves as innocent young victims crushed into non-existence by the relentless hands of conservatism and duty. If Claggart was the representative of evil on a cosmic scale, Vere was his helpmate, representing institutionalized evil of the established order which they had not created, nor wanted, nor understood.

During the more conservative decade following the World War II the critical attitude towards **Billy Budd** underwent a change. Critics still saw the story as another version of the eternal fight between good and evil. When it was read as a Christian allegory, Vere was God the Father who suffered his spiritual Son to die, so that He, the son, could become the savior. When the story was interpreted in more worldly terms, the Captain was a tragic hero whose difference from other individuals was to have been placed by chance and circumstance in a position where he had to make desicions and who was forced by his nature and upbringing not to evade that responsibility. Being emotionally and intellectually capable of understanding his role as the instrument of social injustice, he deeply suffered for it. According to this interpretation, Vere proved his sincerity by exposing himself to death in a skirmish soon after Billy's condemnation.

The turbulent sixties brought about a reversal of judgement. Captain Vere was once more denounced as the second villain next to Claggart. Noticing the bitter irony in the story, some critics saw Billy's death as meaningless. Others examined the imagery, and found suggestions in it that Vere and Claggart and even the Chaplain who kisses Billy before sending him to death, had morbid or homosexual interests in the fair cheeked welkin eyed boy.

Obviously there is some difficulty of interpretation here. It arises not so much from the changing climates of opinion or varying attitudes of individual readers (although there is that too) as from Melville's insistent and intentional irony which ceates ambiguity. This ambiguity is synonymous with Melville's modernity, and running through all of his work previous to **Billy Budd**, it is the most distinguishing quality that separates him from his romantic contemporaries.

Melville is surprisingly modern in his approach to the slippery nature

of moral truth. His view of the universe rests on a delicate balance of finely defined contrasts. And in this sense, his universe is really a «multiverse» in the definition of Henry Adams (2). In his works the line is always blurred between what can be known and what cannot be known, between faith and its complete rejection, between life within the safe boundaires of reason and irrationality. The passage from one of these areas to the other takes place imperceptibly and the individual is always denied the light of recognition. Moral truth is a composite of all the contrasting elements that go into it. It is everywhere and nowhere. From the way Melville approaches reality one could almost say that he knew about relativity before it was revealed to us by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century advancement in psychology and in social and physical sciences.

Melville's modern approach to reality is evident first of all in the structure of the **novella.** It is too formless, too long for such a simple plot. The pace is too slow. The action often deviates from its main direction and the narration is full of digressions which Melville knows to be «literary sins.» The conclusion does not come after Billy's death. It is left open. The Chapter following Billy's death begins like this: «The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural final.» (3) Unknown to Willam Dean Howells and to Henry James who are, in the 1890'ies groping for new forms in realistic fiction, Melville is laying down here the first fundemental rule. He then continues with an apparently unrelated account of how the French changed the names of their warships after the Revolution and aptly named one as the **Athéiste;** he relates Vere's own death; he records the violently distorted newspaper account of the incident, showing Billy as a bloody murderer and Claggart as a patriotic victim; then finally ends the **novella** with an anonymous ballad, «Billy in the Darbies,» which sadly ruminates on Billy's entirely lovable character.

These irregularities in the structure of the **novella** are functional in

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2) Henry Adams, «The New Multiverse,» **The Modern Tradition**, eds., Richard Ellman and Charles Fiedelson, New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 424.

3) Herman Melville, **Selected Tales and Poems,** ed., Richard Chase, New York: Rinehart and Company, 1959, p. 372. Further references to the text of **Billy Budd** are from the same edition.

providing the reader with the many-sided and finally ambiguous nature of the «facts» that are dealt with.

Neither is the highly convoluted style merely a romantic habit. Reading the digression on Admiral Nelson, one finds it impossible to pin Melville down and say whether he is praising the man's heroism or ironically exposing his foolhardiness, whether he is setting him up as a parallel to Billy or as a parallel or contrast to Vere. The answer is that, he is trying to do all of these things at once, in order to show that the truth about human character and behavior is too complex to be summed up in simple praise or condemnation.

The same principle is at work when we get to the theme of the **novella.** Out of the three major characters two represent the abstract qualities of innocence and evil. In an allegory there should be little or no ambiguity in their portrayal. But here it is not so. Melville brings out the allegorical significance of Billy's and Claggart's characters by using contrasting sets of imagery for each: black and white, goldfinch and scorpion, angel and serpent. But within one set of imagery there are also conflicting elements that undercut the allegory and turn it into symbolism rich with connotated meanings.

Billy is the embodiment of innocence whose purity of spirit takes a visible form in his personal beauty, his nautical skill and his perfect deportment. Cheerfully, he enters the restive world of sailors on board a warship and assumes the role of peacemaker without even being aware of it. Viewed from this angle, he is just another example of the Handsome Sailor whom Melville has met once before in the person of a primitive black African. The author emphasizes Billy's primitive qualities time and again: «Of self-consciousness he seemed to have little or none, or about as much as we may reasonably impute to dog of St. Bernard's breed.» (299) And then again, «he was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been before the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company.» (299) Billy's intellectual faculty is not at all developed; and his innocence serves as blinders on a horse, making him insensitive to imminent danger.

These qualities added to the deficiency in his speech, make one wonder «what might eventually befall a nature like that, dropped into a world not without some man-traps.» (316) We are thus prepared for Billy's tragic end.

And Billy behaves in perfect accordance with these qualities down to the very stutter which leads him to answer in a fatal blow when he is falsely accused of treason by the trecherous Claggart. He is then given

the penalty of death by hanging according to the articles of war. His final words, «God bless Captain Vere!» serve to establish order among the crew who are on the verge of an uprisal.

So far Billy is nothing but extraordinarily innocent ordinary young sailor with a heart large enough to forgive without understanding the man who condemned him to die.

Melville, however, does not stop there. From the very beginning he brings in supernatural overtones that add another dimension to Billy's character. About the circumstances of his birth there is the usual mystery of illegitimacy and nobility that surrounds the origin of deities and mythical heroes. The moment of his death may also be the moment of his rebirth: «At the same moment it changed that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn» (367). His dead body refutes al physical laws by not going through the spasmodic movements expected in such cases, baffling all witnesses including a man of science, the ship's surgeon. What is more, in the final Chapter we find that the same spar from which Billy's body suspended is treated reverentially as a holy relic by the sailors for many years afterwards. «To them,» Melville says, «a chip of it was a piece of the cross» (374).

Claggart, who is Billy's counterpart in black, is treated with similar ambiguity. In this case Melville begins by bringing to the foreground the supernatural associations which he wants to emphasize. Claggart represents the «mystery of iniquity» at the core of the universe. He is the devil incarnate whose malice is without motivation or excuse. «To pass from a normal nature to him one must cross 'the deadly space between|» (320). If Billy's «agressive goodness» (4) in E. M. Forster's words can be defined as a positive energy released by absolute innocence, the energy Claggart naturally releases is of the negative sort. Melville leaves no doubt as to the allegorical significance of this character, «in whom mania of an evil nature, not endgendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short'a... depravity according to nature'» (322) exists. And again, «A nature like Claggart's surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are,

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4) E. M. Forster, **Aspects of the Novel,** New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954, p. 141.

what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible act out to the end the part allotted to it» (324).

But Melville does not stop there. For as he said at the beginning, the story is «no romance.» Adding another dimension to Claggart's character, he fills in the worldly elements. Nothing is known about his past life. Yet there are rumors that he has committed some unknown crime and is taking shelter in the King's navy. Or he may have been drafted directly from jail. Melville once knew a man who knew for a fact that this measure was taken at times of emergency. So far what we learn about Claggart does not clash with his allegorical significance. But then, Melville goes on to hint that these rumors may not have been grounded on any fact at all. There may not have been much wrong with the master-at-arms except for his sinister appearance and the fact that in his position as chief of police he was bound to be disliked and vilified by the crew. Besides, sailors are apt to create exaggerated stories of mysterious depravity and «romance it.» With these remarks and others like them even such an admittedly one-dimensional charecter like Claggart gains some ambiguity.

When all is said, however, we still see Billy and Claggart as symbols for goodness and evil; for that aspect of the character of each is magnified to overshadow the rest. Each is half a man and complements the other showing the duality in human nature. Since the elements of innocence and depravity are heightened to their last powers in them there is no way for them but to destroy each other.

Captain Vere's character, on the other hand, is not drawn in black or white, but is treated with full complexity. The dominant color here is grey, the color of his eyes. Melville at first places Vere in his historical setting for that is the only way to understand a real human being; the year 1897, the atmosphere of revolution and disturbance all over Christendom; the aftermath of the Spithead and Nore mutinies in the British navy, a battleship in that navy heading for encounter with the enemy, carrying unwilling sailors taken over from merchant ships and crew involved in recent mutinies.

Vere is an experienced soldier who knows how to handle the situation without appearing tense. He is, like Nelson, brave to the degree of rashness, but he is also prudent like Wellington. Unlike Nelson he is not vainglorious. He behaves mildly towards his men, but show the disciplinarian in him when necessary. He is an intellectual, reading books «treating

actual men and events.» He is conservative in politics and distrusts innopeace of the world and the true welfare of mankind.

Vere is fully aware of Billy's innocence and Claggart's guilt. But in the light of the martial code, Billy has killed his superior officer during war time, and the innocent one and the guilty have thus changed places. From the moment of the fatal blow Vere knows what the penalty will be. Yet, he is fully aware of the moral responsibility of condemning an innocent man. Unwilling to shoulder this responsibility all by himself he convenes a drumhead court. But when he sees that his officers are carried away by sympathy and pity for Billy, he overrules the court and pronounces the judgement himself. For «a true military officer» Melville says, «is in one particular like a true monk. Not with more of self abnegation will the latter keep his vows of monastic obedience than the former his vows of allegiance to military duty» (348).

Captain Vere's sympathy for Billy gives him great pain, but the agitated motions he goes through pacing in his cabin symbolize «a mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts strong as the wind and sea» (353). In assuming the multiple roles of witness, defense attorney, prosecutor and judge, in addition to his primary role of Captain, he shows his full understanding of the ambivalence of his position. The question about Vere is not so much whether he should have judged differently, as whether it was possible for him to judge differently. Understanding Vere's position may not necessarily lead to forgiveness either in the author or in the reader, but Melville definitely seems to have refrained from judgement. Pretending to quote «a writer whom few know» the author makes the following remark about Vere's predicament: «Forty years after a battle it is easy for a non-combatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing personally and under fire to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it. Much so with respect to other emergencies involving considerations both practical and moral, and when it is imperative promptly to act. The greater the the fog the more it imperils the steamer, and speed is put on though at the hazard of running somebody down. Little ween the snug card-players in the cabin, of the responsibilities of the sleepless on the bridge» (368).

What is clear that Melville has created in Vere a fully modern character of fiction with all its complexity and ambiguity; it shows that reality about a human being is incompatible with moral judgement and moral judgement in connection with human behavior is meaningless.