HOLY OBLIVION: A READING OF HERMAN MELVILLE'S

BILLY BUDD, SAILOR

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ABSTRACT

Although the Chicago text of Herman Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor affords an opportunity for more reliable critical interpretations, none can be final. Given this caveat, the aim of the thesis, which is a consecutive and cumulative reading of the work, is to inquire into what I have termed, the repressed intent of the novella, which finds expression in the multiple viewpoint of the narrator and in turn through the characters and their sexual dimensions. The thesis elaborates the theme of madness which the activity of the story underlines, in conjunction with the violence of the characters' interactions.

Concomitantly, the reading explores Melville's concern with the philosophy of despair. The thesis suggests that the composition of Billy Budd, Sailor was an attempt, on the author's part, to come to terms with the preoccupations of a lifetime, yet they remain within a psychologically blurred perspective, a fact accounting for the distortion of the tale, and its unfinished state. An analysis of themes and images supports the contention that there is a strong element of repression in the novella.

Since the thesis is a chronological reading of the tale, the chapter headings signal the concerns of each section without reflecting a principle of structure. The introduction
develops a framework within which the reading operates, and the first chapter elaborates this framework with reference to specific images and themes. The reading considers the major characters qua characters and as elaborations of the narrator and agents of his psychology. The thesis examines the role of the narrator, the presence of latent madness, the homoerotic and the philosophy of repression in the work.
To

J. Z.
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INTRODUCTION

You are young (as I said before) but I ain't; and at my years, and with my disposition, or rather constitution, one gets to care less and less for everything except downright good feeling. Life is so short, and so ridiculous and irrational (from a certain point of view) that one knows not what to make of it, unless—well, finish the sentence for yourself.

Think
In these inexplicable fleshly bonds

H. M.

N.B. I aint crazy.

When Raymond Weaver salvaged *Billy Budd, Sailor* from Herman Melville's posthumous papers and published it in 1924, he helped to lay the foundations of the criticism industry that has since flourished. Much of the commentary has been based on the not altogether exact editions of Professor Weaver, and F. Barron Freeman. The publication of a collated text by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., grants an opportunity for interpretations that may be far more reliable than those based on the earlier editions.

A multiplicity of views has been put forward. John Bernstein feels, "The ultimate message of *Billy Budd* is an appeal to revolution, and the work is Melville's most complete statement on rebellion, both political and spiritual."\(^2\) R. W. B. Lewis, acceding to the line of one of the earliest critical pieces writes that, "it would be pointless to deny that it is a testament of acceptance, as Mr. Watson has said . . .",\(^3\) a position elaborated by Newton Arvin, who considers the novella as "the work of a man on the last verge of mortal existence who wishes to take his departure with a word of acceptance and reconciliation on his lips."\(^4\) Ray B. Browne has gone so far as to identify precisely the conflict of political ideologies within the work as those of Edmund Burke and Tom Paine,\(^5\) and another critic, acknowledging that the idea of revolution is central to the book, sees it as "... a bitter lament over the futility of revolt."\(^6\) It has
been considered in religious, mythological terms, as "a world in which perfect innocence must be ritually sacrificed . . .", or, in the view of Richard Chase, who grants the sexuality of the work: "The real theme of *Billy Budd* is castration and cannibalism, the ritual murder and eating of the Host."  

Whether the work is ironic, unified, or revolutionary are areas of dispute among scholars and individual readers; on this matter there can be no universal agreement: Kingsley Widmer writes, "The irregularities in form, style and material drastically compromise any simple moral or mythic interpretation. To contend otherwise is to rewrite the story." On the other hand, merely because of the text's incompleteness, to accept Paul Brodtkorb's position which places the story in a situation where "anything goes, everything is demonstrable, and there can be no end to interpretive disagreement even within the framework of one set of categories and controlling assumptions" is to invoke the Rorschach principle. Given the nature of the text and the welter of criticism, I do not propose a final interpretation. Rather, this thesis is an exploration of several ideas about the novella and is therefore meant to be suggestive and illuminating, but not categorical in its interpretation.

The aim of the thesis is to enquire into what I call the work's repressed intent. The contradiction within the phrase is intentional in that it signifies that there
are forces both conscious and unconscious at work to hold back the discoveries that the author is intent upon making; Melville is placed between two antitheses—he attempts to work out and come to terms with the problems inherent in his own life, and by extension in the story. At the same time the realization of these terms becomes so painful that it must be relegated to the unconscious. The repressed intent finds expression in the authoritarian and sexual qualities of the characters, notably through the shifting perspective of the narrator. Counterpoised against the repressed intent is the theme of madness, one of Melville's favourites which he explored in other works; he is reluctant to pinpoint a specific definition of this malady, and he uses the term in diverse contexts, but always with an awareness of the sense of its importance in human affairs. As he had written in Moby-Dick: "Best, therefore withhold any amazement at the strangely gallied whales before us, for there is no folly of the beast of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of man." Mad1sness is expressly linked with the secret and the clandestine in the narrator's exploration of human motives, often with the overtones of the irrational and of evil. Under the fable lurk forces Melville wished to contain within an art form; yet the raw stuff of the dream remains frighteningly close to the surface, at times in an internecine relationship with it. The fable, in fact, becomes a parable of sexuality, and the question as to whether Melville condemns
or exonerates Vere becomes, in the light of the novella's dynamic, a pseudo-question.

Certainly, *Billy Budd, Sailor* never reached finished form under the pen of Herman Melville, and one of the concerns of the thesis is to consider the reasons for the novella's unfinished state coming as it does in the final years of the author's life and providing the closing parenthesis. The thesis suggests that the very nature of the problems formulated in the story itself militates against its completion. That its composition was an exercise in objectifying and distancing highly subjective concerns of the author becomes clearer on a close textual examination of the work. In this connection the role of the narrator can be seen to fulfill a specific task enunciated by Ernst Kris:

The activity of the story teller serves a multiplicity of functions; it is an attempt to gain control over the traumatic experience which, long repressed still exercises influences; and at the same time it brings enjoyment in reproducing, with variations, the pleasurable experience of conquest. 12

Considering the nature of the work, it seems dubious that there was, for Melville, any "pleasurable conquest," and the absence of artistic distance makes the work nonsensical if considered from the point of view of having, "... the dignity of an achieved detachment." 13 To phrase the proposition in a slightly different form: the alleged ambiguity, a much-praised quality of the work, is, in the last analysis, more an unresolved conflict; Arnold Hauser observes:
Ambiguity is, in fact, just as is a neurotic symptom or a dream, the expression of a spiritual tension in which one engages and remains, not for fun, but because none of the conflicting tendencies present in the ambiguous experience appears acceptable. 14

The elaboration of a consistent and a single attitude would necessitate a recognition, in the fullest sense, of the totality of implication within it. And this the narrator, and at second remove, Melville, is not entirely prepared to do.

In their introduction to the revised text, Mayford and Sealts trace the work from its inception to the form left in the bundle in the trunk where it was placed by Mrs. Melville after the death of her husband. According to the editors, there are "three broad phases of development"15 and current criticism would seem to accept two facts of crucial importance in interpretation: that the novella was not finished and that the shift in focus throughout the novel is intentional. However, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, paraphrasing Baudelaire, has observed, "there are finished works which we cannot say have ever been completed, and unfinished works which say what they meant."16 Melville's final work can hardly be called incomplete in the sense of being truncated. Melville himself in a letter hints at the problem:

I have latterly come into possession of unobstructed leisure, but only just as, in the course of nature, my vigor sensibly declines. What little of it is left I husband for certain matters as yet incomplete, and which indeed may never be completed. 17
The work is unfinished, and the thesis suggests that the artistic fragmentation, as well as the deflected "angle of narration" in Alex Comfort's phrase, result from the author's difficulty in controlling material that is close to the unconscious, and therefore close to the level of phantasy; the shifting narrator emerges from this difficulty and not through an entirely conscious artistic intent.

Another feature of importance in understanding the conundrum that is *Billy Budd, Sailor*, is that, begun with the broadside in 1885, it was written during the final phase when the author's career was in eclipse; remarks made by his wife, his reading, (particularly of Schopenhauer), his isolation from his family and others, bear this out; his wife, Elisabeth, in a letter at the time of his retirement, hopes he will embark upon "a more quiet frame of mind. . . ."18 Apropos of Schopenhauerian pessimism, Lawrance Thompson writes,

". . . that Melville was reading widely, and over a period of months and years, in Schopenhauer, during the exact years and months when Melville was writing and revising *Billy Budd*, should be of more than passing interest to anyone who honestly wishes to understand Melville's meaning in *Billy Budd*. 19"

Melville even as a young man was not overwhelmingly buoyant; the roots of despair were thrust into the soil of his early exposure to Calvinism, and in *Typee*, he wrote:

"I will frankly declare, that after passing a few weeks in this valley of the Marquesas, I formed a higher estimate of human nature than I had ever before entertained. But alas! since then I have been one of the crew of a man-of-war, and the pent-up wickedness of five hundred men has nearly over-turned all my previous theories."20
During Melville's later years, the art and philosophy of "seeing" was undergoing marked changes in a variety of disciplines; Cezanne, within the world of painting explored the same problems Edmund Husserl formulated within the philosophical discipline of phenomenology. Perception is to a high degree individualistic and Melville, the artist, had, in his maturity apprehended this truth and attempted to incorporate it in his final work. John W. Rathbun's useful article, "Billy Budd and the Limits of Perception," isolates as the centre of the work, 

... the point that social forms and conventions radically narrow the range of individual perception and response. What Melville is telling us, I think, is that society elaborates social forms and conventions to render the individual subordinate to social norms. 21

The observation is valid, but Rathbun does not elaborate the implications, or indeed, carry them through. Our perception is cumulative--we are what we see; as R. D. Laing puts it, with respect to the individual as a whole, "Our behaviour is a function of our experience." 22 Applied to the novella, the interacting perceptions of the characters can be regarded as highly unusual: for example, how can Billy possibly fail to notice Claggart's aggression? Yet the characters' strange behaviour, indeed, bordering the autistic, is consistent with the blurring prevalent throughout. They are unable to understand their relationships to each other in the same way that the reader is unable to understand their interactions, from the outside, as it were; in other words, the characters
are so drawn as to negate their having insight into their own actions, and this blindness spills over to the narrator and in turn to the reader. Undoubtedly the characters may be understood as Melville's rejection of the Rousseauistic ideal, embodied in Billy, but to approach the work with this stance is to arrive at a very superficial critique. Rathburn concludes his article by noting that, "Billy Budd accepts evil as part and parcel of the universe . . ." (a position strikingly similar to Watson's early one), and Rathbun goes on, in the last three sentences of his article to imply that the reader remains bounded and encapsulated within his own world:

Our insight is clogged by forms and conventions. But fortunately for some of us our individuality is not completely buried. Our perceptions are dimmed and our aspirations limited, which is pathetic, yet occasionally we can be stirred to a muted awareness of our humanity. 23

Just how we are to be stirred is not indicated. This critical observation betokens a reading that remains within the confines and dictates of Melville's own philosophy of negation and denial, although this critic contends that "the tone of that last chapter indicates that a modicum of comfort is better than none, acceptance preferable to despair." 24 In the same way that the characters fail to relate to the externality surrounding them, the reader, too, in Rathbun's view, is relegated to this unknowing sphere.

At the same time, Rathbun remains within the strictures of Melvillesian tragedy, a peculiar sort that is tautologic-
ally Calvinistic--man is doomed because he is evil: "The Calvinistic tradition had been established on both sides of the family generations before Melville was born," writes William Braswell,²⁵ and Melville is quoted by Newton Arvin as designating Calvinistic predestination "that most true Christian doctrine of the utter nothingness of good works."²⁶ Man is born in sin and remains in the state that Melville describes as "that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free."²⁷

Accompanying the Calvinistic strain is a tinge of nostalgia and sentimentalism that winks at the morbid, and collapses in despair and nihilism. Karl Jaspers has, with acute understanding, chronicled this modern phenomenon, as it involves the tragic, and his formulation is pertinent to Billy Budd, Sailor:

Wherever total lack of faith seeks to parade as form, it finds the philosophy of nothing-but-tragedy well suited as a camouflage for nothingness. Tragic grandeur is the prop whereby the arrogant nihilist can elevate himself to the pathos of feeling himself a hero. Where seriousness has been lost, an experience of pseudo-seriousness is produced by the violent stimulant of tragedy. The racial past, the sagas, and Greek tragedy are all invoked. Yet what had then been the reality of faith becomes now a deliberate and dishonest substitute for nothingness. The old beliefs are used as phrases to lend a heroic cast to the very un-heroic degeneration of one's own existence, or else to lend a cheap aura of heroism to a life lived in comfort and security.
Such perversion of tragic philosophy then sets free the turmoil of dark impulses: the delight in meaningless activity, in torturing and in being tortured, in destruction for its own sake, in the raging hatred against the world and man coupled with the raging hatred against one's own despised existence. 28

Jaspers' remarks provide an illuminating gloss on the novella's philosophy; the remarks concerning the meaninglessness of existence are particularly appropriate to Captain Vere, a character described as being capable of causing "consternation even in Hell; he would be so boring to torment," whose empty existence is exhibited in the parade of pomp and ceremony of officialdom. This latter-day Nelson views himself in a heroic cast. The retreat into despair leaves a void at the centre of the work; Melville's appeal to religion and grand rhetoric disguises the essential meaninglessness of lost faith and the inability of language to function within its vacuum. It is not only to the narrator that Jaspers' remarks apply, but to the author as well, who in creating the work, has effected a tri-partite splitting and projecting of various drives, obsessions and phantasies, which are given flesh in the characters who unleash violence upon others around them. The torture to which Jaspers refers takes the form of structured violence in the novella. Violence creates the relationships among the characters; it is the tie that binds, but which is obfuscated by the story itself.

A comment on Melville's writing style is appropriate here: he employs a style which might be termed both ten-
tative and exclusive and both these attributes suit the intention of the novella; Melville is attempting to suggest rather than define. Furthermore, through the successive stages of the manuscript, it is apparent that the author has made less definite the commitment of the narrator to any one position. The reasons for this are explored in the thesis.

The second stylistic device, which stems from the former, is the narrator's method of qualifying almost any remark lest it dangerously lapse into a concrete statement. In grammatical terms, Melville deploys adverbs and phrases in apposition, as can be seen in the prefatory remarks to the introduction of the titular hero: "The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make" (L.19) and again in the naming:

Such a cynosure, at least in aspect, and something such too in nature, though with important variations made apparent as the story proceeds, was welkin-eyed Billy Budd, --or Baby Budd, as more familiarly, under circumstances hereafter to be given, he at last came to be called. . . . (L.10)

This excerpt provides a cross-section of the author's devices--the reluctance to give information through the narrator, except when heavily qualified, the holding back and enticing, the air of mystery, the distended sentence form, and the variation in Billy's name along with the hint at the variation of his "nature". Melville is reluctant to name. To name is to identify. To identify is to precipitate recognition, then understanding. Another feature of the description that
is important is its palpability: it is visual and tactile; the reader is struck by the appearance of the hero as a cynosure, and it is to the physicality that the reader is brought again and again, and yet is is from the physical that the reader is diverted by the various and sundry statagems of the story in its approach/avoidance attitude toward the homoerotic element. What has been called, "the curiously appropriate honorific prose of the tale . . ." is, in fact, a prose which evokes and extends the sentimentalism present in the work's philosophy. Melville's equivocal style and oblique manner occurs also in his use of a series of negations of the "no-un" variety, of which the following is a representative example: "And being of warm blood, he had not the phlegm tacitly to negative any proposition by unresponsive inaction." (L.154)

Much criticism, including Rathbun's, even with its usage of new critical methods serves only to revert to E. L. Grant Watson's position in his pioneer study; the "No! in thunder" is transformed into an "everlasting yea." Furthermore criticism seems to remain trapped by the either/or extremes, and academics remain polarized in their views, between what Paul Brodtkorb calls the "warring critical armies of the ironists and the plain speakers. . . ." Ray B. West, Jr. expresses the following view: "... **Billy Budd** as a unified work not only is not marred by digressions and irrelevancies, it is a triumph of architectonic
Any interpretation with pretense to the absolute courts more than one of the seven deadly sins. What can, however, be said with reasonable certainty is that Melville was attempting to shape a paradigm; the Biblical allusions and the diverse belletristic touches attest to that; the author has cast the paradigm in the form of myth, but the myth cannot support the weight. In the disintegration of the myth can be witnessed a secondary pattern, compounded of savagery and madness which tends to hold the story together. Not so much the conscious literary machinery superimposed on a sea story, it is rather the sub-surface dynamics of the work: the dream-like tapestry of incidents and interrelationships—the father, the son and the unholy ghost; the social and the private, the individual versus the collective, impulse and repression of the homoerotic. These factors forge a kind of coherence beneath the surface.

The thesis offers a consecutive reading of the novel with reference to the latent psychology of the work. The chapter titles reflect the main concerns of each section but do not constitute an organizing principle, since the thesis is constructed as a reading. Theme and imagery, words that have become almost disreputable in criticism, I employ in connection with the complementary notions in the work: of revolt and suppression, of civilization and barbarism, of rationality and irrationality, and the manner in which
Melville embellishes them. These themes are brilliantly intertwined and mirror each other. An analysis of these elements reveals the proposition that Vereism has to triumph, for its noesis is counterveiled against the dark forces of bodily impulse.

Billy Budd, Sailor is created out of a culture which is fascinated with good and evil, innocence and experience and the romantic experience of life. Richard Chase writes:

Judging by our greatest novels, the American imagination, even when it wishes to assuage and reconcile the contradiction of life, has not been stirred by the possibility of catharsis or incarnation, by the tragic or Christian possibility. It has been stirred, rather, by the aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder. 35

In that sense, Melville's aestheticism tended to move in the direction of apocalypse. The metaphysic emerging from his final work exudes mystification, nihilism and despair. Man is viewed as victimized by his impulses and therefore forced into compliance with prevalent modes of conduct, giving rise to a morality, which, rather than providing for man's real needs, is based on compulsion and negation. The narrator endeavours to construct a paradigm wherein his inner space can remain linear, horological, historical and meliorative; beneath the paradigm, there is an asymmetry which offers, concomitantly, disillusion, despair and the nullification of any significance in life, a "holy oblivion." (L.289)
CHAPTER I

UNFREEDOM IN THE LUNATIC COSMOS

The Navy is the asylum for the perverse, the home of the unfortunate. Here the sons of adversity meet the children of calamity, and here the children of calamity meet the offspring of sin.

_White-Jacket_
In the opening chapter Melville immediately creates his "world"; it is a mad world of secretiveness and unfreedom where man is without will: the title, the dedication and the first paragraphs immediately establish some of the central motifs of the novella. It is indeed, an "inside narrative," one which the author painstakingly shrouds with an ambience of mystery;¹ the phrase has often been taken to imply that Melville was rehearsing the historical Somers event, transforming it from the convert into an exposé. More than this, however, the story is the handling of the workings of a ship in addition to the portrayal of the dynamics of character, specifically the three major ones, who can, in fact, be regarded as a psychological splitting into discrete segments of one phenomenon. Underlying this are the tensions of the creative mind in the act of attempting to gain insight into itself, an act which at once causes both blocking and illumination, the failure of perception into the "ragged edges" of the tale.

The "inside narrative" phrase is echoed at the beginning of the third chapter when the narrator mysteriously relates that the story's concern is "the inner life of one particular ship and the career of an individual sailor."² (L.49) To Jack Chase, Englishman extraordinaire, poetaster, seaman, a revolutionary who "went to draw a partisan blade in the civil commotions of Peru and befriend, heart and soul, what he deemed the cause of the Right"² and who was later
forced to gain a livelihood by smuggling, the novella is
dedicated. This figure was, for the young Melville, a
symbol of liberation and a Byronic hero:

Jack would have done honour to the Queen of
England's drawing room; Jack must have been
a by-blow of some British Admiral of the Blue.
A finer specimen of the island race of English-
men could not have been picked out of
Westminster Abbey of a coronation day. 3

The older Melville sees him through different eyes as a
pastorale emblem of youth.

The first sentence of the novella alludes to the
sailors as "ashore on liberty" (L.2) and it is in juxtaposition
to this that the author explores the various modes of un-
freedom, from the naval impressment to the more philosophic,
existential captivity-in-the-world, which is re-iterated in
the concluding line of the dramatic monologue, "I am sleepy,
and the oozy weeds about me twist." (L.351) The "Handsome
Sailor" of the first paragraph augments the notion of the
Byronic hero; he is "superior," but not "vainglorious" (L.3)
and the "spontaneous homage of his shipmates" (L.3) makes
of him an isolato, reinforced by the digression on the
African in the following paragraph. Both the African and
the Handsome Sailor are familiar Melvillean figures who
have their counterparts throughout the story, i.e., the work
is peopled by characters whose relationship to other
characters, and even to themselves, is signalled by a
complete detachment. Melville depicts the "superior figure"
(L.1) and throughout the tale is concerned either directly or indirectly with nobility, a subject common to most of his works, but on which he particularly fixated in *Pierre*, or *The Ambiguities*. All the characters are isolated within themselves on the isolated great warship. The story's "microcosmic world of a great warship" (L.35) is also paralleled with a village and its inhabitants: "the people of a great warship being in one respect like villagers. . . ." (L.291) At one point, the warship is significantly isolated from the rest of the fleet, "on a separate duty as a scout and at times on less temporary service. . . ."

(L.49) In Melville's works, inanimate objects like the boat, search, as do the characters; everything is on an earthly quest.

In *White-Jacket*, Melville had been pondering similar ideas; he subtitled the book, "The World in a Man-of-War" and saw the ship as "a bit of terra firma cut off from the main. . . ." He moved from his youthful position as an involved member of a crew with a feeling that among men, life had adventure and that some of the wrongs of the world could be righted, to the position later in his life, when he locked himself in his study to work on a novel from whose actions and premises issues despair. His volte-face was to some extent more dramatic than Billy and Claggart's. Indeed, Melville's apostasy reveals a nihilistic inversion of what in the earlier part of the work is treated and and defined
One major function of the terminology of Nothing is to sterilize desire beyond the grave of its Christian connotations, good or bad, orthodox or heretical. (The loves of the angels, or, for that matter, of the devils, are to be no part of the story.) Another function of Nothing is to heighten the values of the romance by making them inaccessible, mysterious, and highly charged; those who disdain the world and all that is in it must have seen something beyond it which is precious indeed. And still another function is to provide a terminal to which, across a suitable space of mind, the spark of electric desire can be made to leap in a rhythm of paradox. There must be something "out there" for the spark to leap to; its leaping is presumptive evidence that there is something "out there"; the distance it leaps is a measure of the pressure behind it. 5

The world of the warship renders sanity and volition illusory. In this world who can be free? Billy's impressment is an absolute abrogation of his personal freedom, a detail linked to the attitude of the work's pre-determinism and philosophic fatalism. (Later the narrator says of Billy, "Like the animals, though no philosopher, he was, without knowing it, practically a fatalist." (L.31) Part of the etiology of the fatalism lies in the work's repressed intent." The narrator makes clear that there are no alternatives, that "any demur would have been as idle as the protest of a goldfinch popped into a cage." (L.12) The simile supports the notion of impressment, and there is a deeper import, since it is only Billy who is impressed and this on the basis of the officer's "first spontaneous choice"
before the remainder of the crew is assembled for inspection; the inspection confirms the astuteness of the spontaneous choice and we are led to doubt, somehow, the narrator's account of the democracy of the situation.

The reader learns that "to the surprise of the ship's company... Billy made no demur" (L.12) though why should he, if it in the first place be idle to do so, and in the second, out of character, for Billy's passive character is designated by his "uncomplaining acquiescence." (L.13) The narrator's stance here is contradictory, and his accuracy and reliability may, therefore, be called into question. It is precisely the impressment scene's function to serve in establishing Billy's passive response to situations. The narrator, as a result, can be seen to be involved with the narrative at the level of affect: no direct equation is being formulated between Melville and the narrator in terms of literary persona; this would be unnecessary. However, at the psychological level the relationships between the characters and the narrator and the author are far more complex and significant. For example, it might be said that the story as a whole is narrative phantasy taking place only in Captain Vere's head, transcribed by a less than objective amanuensis, i.e., Melville encompasses his "second self," in Edward Dowden's phrase, who creates Vere, who through a process of psychological splitting creates the characters: the primary phantasy projection process
distills three discrepant characters, and the narrative underscores these characters with a consideration of madness.
CHAPTER II

THE NARRATOR AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAJOR CHARACTERS

"Phrenologically, he was without a soul."

White-Jacket

"Can the brotherhood of the race of man ever hope to prevail in a man-of-war, where one man's blame is almost another's blessing?"

White-Jacket
A. **Billy Budd**

Although the phantasy projection of the novella gives rise to three major characters, the others can be viewed in the function of elaborations. Captain Graveling is a variant father-figure. His early introduction into the story establishes a touchstone by means of which Captain Vere may be measured. Graveling is an "honest soul" and is depicted in the most favourable of terms:

... he was fifty or thereabouts, a little inclined to corpulence, a prepossessing face, unwhiskered, and of a agreeable color--a rather full face, humanely intelligent in expression. (L.14)

He is a man whose internal and external qualities make him sympathetic: "He had much prudence, much conscientiousness and there were occasions when these virtues were the cause of overmuch disquietude in him," causing him to take "to heart those serious responsibilities not so heavily borne by some shipmasters." (L.16) His interest in Billy is certainly fatherly and in esteeming Billy's quality of peacemaking, on losing him, he is moved close to tears; formerly, Graveling's ship had been a "rat-pit of quarrels" (L.19), and we see Billy again juxtaposed in this basic motif of harmony. Graveling serves as a complement to Billy's harmony, for he, too, is musically rendered--" a certain musical chime in his voice seemed to be the veritable unobstructed outcome of the innermost man." (L.14) As a contrast the story shows how the inner Billy cannot be
articulated. Graveling is measured also against Ratcliffe and the world he represents: civility is confronted by barbarism; Ratcliffe's ungracious behaviour foreshadows the events to come, when Billy departs the Rights-of-Man, named in honour of Thomas Paine for the Burkean Bellipotent. Yet Melville remains mute about just how coarse and vulgar things really become under the command of Captain Vere; these details tend to be displaced, generally sublimated upward into more elevated, ethereal particulars. The whole contradiction is contained within the dubious benediction offered by Ratcliffe upon "the fighting peacemakers" which finds its counterpart later in the description of the minister hovering over Billy prior to the execution. This antithesis captures the tension between the two spheres of the Melvillean world. Even in the earlier White-Jacket, the author's treatment of similar material seems tangential and evasive:

Like pears closely packed, the crowded crew mutually decay through close contact, and every plague-spot is contagious. Still more, from this same close confinement—so far as it affects the common sailors—arise other evils, so direful that they will hardly bear even so much as an allusion. What too many seamen are when ashore is very well known; but what some of them become when completely cut off from shore indulgences can hardly be imagined by landsmen. The sins for which the cities of the plain were overthrown still linger in some of the wooden-walled Gomorrah's of the deep. More than once complaints were made at the mast in the Neversink, from which the deck officer would turn away with loathing, refuse to hear them, and command the complainant out of his sight. 1
From the first chapter we learn something of the mysterious nature of Apollo, in Captain Graveling's nomenclature. He is a "peacemaker" and a "jewel" (L.23), liked and attended to by all the crew; he is spontaneous as is evidenced in what is to be ostensibly, within a later retrospective analysis of his actions, his first mistake, as he bids adieu to his former ship. He is compared to the animals in his fatalism and later his self-consciousness is compared to a Saint Bernard's (L.42), finally to be re-iterated in his canine submission to Vere. Yet Billy is not pure innocence; his fatal flaw, "this uncomplaining acquiescence" (L.13) is subtly underscored by Graveling's "glance of silent reproach" (L.13), and his later remark that Billy "makes no dissent." (L. 25) Total acquiescence is an integral part of the psychological dynamic of the work: the fatalism and yea-saying border on the masochistic and constitute a complementary aspect of the dynamism. This innocence is tainted by the resort to violence in the incident with Red Whiskers which anticipates the later key scene during the accusation. Admittedly, Billy's violence is of the unpremeditated kind, (ironically Apollo is unthinking), but surely that category does not offer absolution merely because it is a direct response. In Graveling's rendering of the attack on Red Whiskers, he uses the phrase, "Quick as lightening Billy let fly his
"arm" (L.21) a description connoting a mechanical, automatic and disconnected quality to the act, as if somehow Billy is so detached he lacks control, as in his spontaneous farewell to the Rights-of-Man. Billy is, as it were, out of control, since "he never meant to do quite as much as he did. . . ." (L.21)

Billy is merry, youthful, possessed of "unpretentious good looks and a sort of genial happy-go-lucky air." (L.32)

In his transfer from ship to ship, there is clearly the sacrificial tone of a sheep being offered up for the slaughter. Billy's welcome to the Bellipotent is in the form of a sharp roar from Ratcliffe, in the manner of address to a dog, demanding him to sit down. Although the action contravened naval decorum, the narrator meticulously points out that Billy is not versed in the way of the world; he is incapable of satire, and "to deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature." (L.30)

Billy lacks self-awareness, inner depth. He is a loner whose "entire family was practically invested in himself" (L.33) and "a presumable by-blow" (L.41), like Jack Chase, and as such is a truly modern existential hero, estranged from his shipmates by being a "cynosure" placed upon a pedestal, and alienated from himself, seemingly disjointed from whatever emotions and perceptions he may at all have. Rather, he is more like a fearful animal, anxious not to do wrong, and to please, responding almost instinctually.
His pleasing aspect is frequently alluded to: he possesses a "fully developed frame" but it is set below a face with "a lingering adolescent expression:" (L.35) it is with these qualities that Billy, "a novice in the complexities of factitious life" (L.35) must face a "more knowing world"; the expulsion of Adam has been achieved. However, this latter-day Adam remains unaware of the changed condition--his behaviour remains the same from one world to the other. This apparent inconsistency remains inexplicable in terms of the literary plane of the work and it is only through recognizing the subconscious function Billy is playing that any meaning becomes clear. Often it has been suggested that Billy is both Adam and Christ, again another inconsistency unless considered at the sub-surface level.

At this level Billy is without insight and is autistic, like the other characters, in the sense that he lacks reference to externality, seemingly hermetically enclosed as a self-contained entity. He is portrayed in female terms: he has a "smooth face all but feminine in purity of natural complexion" (L.35; the lily in the cheek is elaborated in analogy to "a rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces and brought into competition with the highborn dames of the court." (L.36) The 18th Century convention of the country and the city reinforces the dualistic cosmology--ideal versus real, innocence versus
experience, and good versus evil, and in a few paragraphs, the antithesis is elaborated in conventional Christian terminology. Once more the narrator observes that "this change of circumstances he scarce noted." (L.37) In conjunction with the feminine analogy and consistent with Billy's proclivity for being insensitive to the drift of activity around him, "little did he observe that something about him provoked an ambiguous smile in one or two harder faces among the bluejackets." (L.37) Along with "the peculiar favorable effect his person and demeanor had . . ." (L.37), Billy is depicted as pure beauty and the response to him, covertly by the narrator and dramatically by the actions of his shipmates, is clearly homosexual. The following description by the narrator makes plain this point:

Cast in a mold peculiar to the finest physical examples of those Englishmen in whom the Saxon strain would seem not at all to partake of any Norman or other admixture, he showed in face that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules. But this again was subtly modified by another and pervasive quality. The ear, small and shapely, the arch of the foot, the curve in mouth and nostril, even the indurated hand dyed to the orange-tawny of the toucan's bill, a hand telling alike of the halyards and tar bucket; but, above all, something in the mobile expression, and every chance attitude and movement, something favored by Love and the Graces; all this strangely indicated a lineage in direct contradiction to his lot. (L.38-39)

The physicality of the description, and its minutiae of palpable detail, the allusion to the Greek model and
"the mobile expression, and every chance attitude and movement" establish the context of response. The end of the description transmutes the physical into the mysteriously spiritual: the narrator, in the act of story telling, invests Billy with a noble super-humaness while into the diction and rhetoric of the story itself is siphoned the sexual energy. In the prefatory remarks to Billy's flaw, the narrator concedes that Billy possesses "much of masculine beauty," but this is undercut by a simile linking him to "the beautiful woman in one of Hawthorne's minor tales . . . ." (L.46) Various studies have, in seeking an explanation of Billy's character, accepted him as a spiritualized abstraction: Charles Olson has found him "epicene" and James E. Miller, in accepting the dualistic premiss of heart and head, uncritically assents to the portrait of Billy and the outcome of the story:

Since Billy's disorder is that which springs from the dominance of an out-sized heart over an almost non-existent intellect, his fate, although catastrophic on earth like that of the others, ultimately partakes of a spiritual transfiguration. 4

Billy's intelligence is pre-lapsarian; he is "a sound human creature, one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge" (L.42) but he has "no sharpness of faculty or any trace of the wisdom of the serpent . . . ." (L.43) He is an "upright barbarian" (L.44) whose "simple nature remained unsophisticated by those moral obliquities . . . ." (L.43) He is illiterate but can
sing like a nightingale. (Claggart, too, as well as
Graveling, has a musical quality to his voice. L.119)
The pureness elicited by this description makes the character
ideal to the point of unreality. Billy is made to wear
blinders that serve to negate insight into himself. Further,
it blinds insight into the true nature of the attraction
which the crew members as well as the narrator feel for him,
(Donald addresses him as "Beauty" L.120); the attraction
confuses and it is Melville who is confused ultimately and
thus the whole self-correcting morality of the novella comes
into existence.

To the concept of the Fall and the attendant contrast
of the uncivilized with the civilized, the narrator notes
as pure characteristics, "virtues pristine and unadulterate"
(L.45) which have been "transmitted from a period prior to
Cain's city and citified man (L.45), yet they carry no
redemptive quality whatsoever for the bearer. Man is
corruptible and flawed. In the case of Billy, he possesses
"an occasional liability to a vocal defect" (L.46). This
"organic defect," the narrator annotates as an "instance that
the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden, still
has more or less to do with every human consignment to this
planet of Earth." (L.48) The image is a telling one for
a variety of reasons: It extends the basic motif of
captivity; it subserves the Christian religious imagery of
the novella, specifically in terms of the etiology of evil;
it adds a soupçon of Calvinism and finally and importantly, it introduces orality as a feature of the dynamics. To grasp the central obsession of Billy Budd, Sailor, one must penetrate beyond the religious facade which even the narrator feels somewhat shaky about and which in fact, tends to imperil the authenticity of the story, since he hastily reassures the reader "that the story in which he [Billy Budd] is the main figure is no romance." (L.48) To attribute the stutter to metaphysical forces is perhaps to sublimate what may well be a conversion hysteric symptom. The psychologist Ferenczi writes:

That there are certain connections between anal eroticism and speech I had already learnt from Professor Freud, who told me of a stammerer all whose singularities of speech were to be traced to anal phantasies. Jones too has repeatedly indicated in his writings the displacement of libido from anal activities to phonation. 5

Billy's speech defect, the extended and transformed sexual element, is the other side of the coin to Claggart's verbal ability. Claggart's repressed desire for Billy, which he "swallows" finds an outlet in his oral aggression directed against Billy in the form of accusations.

The Dansker is a curious figure whose function with respect to the mechanics of the story is to tie in some of the loose ends and to act as cerebral adjunct to Billy. He provides the necessary detachment and cynicism impossible to attribute to the cynosure, while concomitantly glossing
and underscoring some of the events of the tale. The Dansker fulfills a number of psychological functions both within the framework of the story and without: he epitomizes what the ambivalent Melville in his old age would, perhaps, like to have been--the all seeing, wise man, an attitude which may account for the sentimentalism of the work.6

Secondly, the Dansker fulfills the wish for detachment from the ongoing passions of the story. He is termed "oracular" and his comments are called "Delphic deliverances." (L.169) He is "the sage Dansker" (L.167), and "the old Merlin," which invests him with a certain magicality. His nature has a twofold purpose: it makes him elevated, granting him access to the accoutrements of nobility all the other characters possess: by being thus elevated, he assumes a position of detachment, of a certain kind of alienation. He knows, but he doesn't act. His behaviour is consistent with that of the interrelationship of the other characters who all seem to exist at their own separate levels, never touching. The Dansker remains un-engagé: "Long experience had very likely brought this old man to that bitter prudence which never interferes in aught and never gives advice." (L.169) In this way his prudence, like that attributed to Claggart, is hidden and furtive. It remains entombed in a crypt of inactivity, hidden behind a wall, like Bartleby, cut off, "from enlightenment or disillusion . . ." (L.148) where emotion is anaesthetized.
B. **Captain Vere**

Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere's introduction is prefaced with the following observation:

> In their general bearing and conduct the commissioned officers of a warship naturally take their tone from the commander, that is if he have that ascendancy of character that ought to be his. (L.73)

In a description involving a similar image and tone, Melville had written in *White-Jacket*, that a ship,

> is a state in itself; and the captain is its king. It is no limited monarchy, where the sturdy Commons have a right to petition, and snarl if they please; but almost a despotism, like the Grand Turk's. The captain's word is law; he never speaks but in the imperative mood. When he stands on his quarter-deck at sea, he absolutely commands as far as the eye can reach. Only the moon and stars are beyond his jurisdiction. He is lord and master of the sun. 7

Vere is an elaboration of this earlier concept. His "ascendancy of character" is distinct; it finds its finest exercise in the maintenance of supremacy during the court martial, as well as through other functions such as the flogging (L.105). As is consistent with his name, we learn that the captain is fair, "an officer mindful of the welfare of his men," (L.74) but this remark is immediately qualified by another, one that encapsulates the essence of the man who, although "mindful" would never be found "tolerating an infraction of discipline." (L.74) Here is the contradiction of the liberal humanist who will protect
his men against the *ancien régime*, in short, an impossible position to maintain and during the course of the story it becomes increasingly apparent that at one level Vere's loyalties are hierarchical and on another level they are ultimately dictated by psychological necessities. For this reason it is difficult to consider Vere as either "a man fundamentally good . . ." or "a very superior and very human man . . .".

Vere is grave and humourless. He is "allied to the higher nobility" (L.74), and possessed of "a virtue aristocratic in kind . . ." (L.78) in the manner of the other principals of the story. His "resolute nature" is accompanied by an "unobstrusiveness of demeanor" (L.77). Vere, like Billy, exudes an air of isolation, "a certain dreaminess of mood." (L.78) This otherworldliness is apparent when "he would absently gaze off at the blank sea," resenting any intrusion "of some minor matter interrupting the current of his thoughts . . ." (L.79) His nickname supports the view that he has a tendency to withdrawal, and the source of the epithet, an Andrew Marvell poem, provides another instance of Vere's singular characteristic, his "discipline severe." The movement of the novella can be seen in the depiction of the Captain as one who is cerebral—he reads much, his noble head is in the clouds, as it were. These factors sustain an exalted tone which set the narrative above mere human passions and suffering.
The level of impulse is ennobled and canalized into the spiritual by the narrator.

Vere's library is oriented to "books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines." (L.82) It is of the utmost significance how authority and other synonymous concepts are repeated throughout the chapter. For these books promote a partisan ideology since they are "books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era--history, biography, and unconventional writers like Montaigne..." (L.83) Vere is a practical man; he appreciates philosophy, but only of a special kind which appeals to the "spirit of common sense" (L.83), and the narrator remarks that Vere reads to buttress his own authority and already existing views: "In this line of reading he found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts--confirmation which he had vainly sought in social converse..." (L.83) We learn why he has retreated; his insularity and the views he develops along are not be made vulnerable under any circumstance. His world is based on certain immutable facts; should these facts prove false, then his world would crumble; these "positive convictions," if indeed they may be so called, "would abide in him essentially unmodified so long as his intelligent part remained unimpaired." (L.83) An ominous prediction, this.
The following description implies that the authoritarian Vere is finally unflexible:

His settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no few minds in those days, minds by nature not inferior to his own. (L.83-84)

Furthermore, the passage hints at one of the persistent themes that is treated more fully later in the work, the over-arching fear of the rational being overtaken by the irrational—the image anticipates Vere's fending off an immanent madness that will sweep him into the irrational unknown. Vere consciously opposes the new, not because the "theories were inimical to the privileged class," but because "they seemed to him insusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind." (L.84) Vere establishes himself as the status quo. One of the more telling ironies of the book considers peace within the context of war; added to this is Vere's reluctance to alter existing institutions, a rigidity precluding apprehension and adaptation to new modes of thinking and their eventual implementation. The general well-being of mankind would, therefore, depend upon a perpetuation of life-as-it-is since any new theory must, of necessity, transform the "lasting institutions." The tautology of the situation becomes clearer if we consider the example that life must go on as it is for if it didn't go on as it is, it would go on differently. The very nature
of life-as-it-is precludes any consideration of life-as-it-might-be.

Vere is described as "lacking in the companionable quality" (L.85). There is a lack of interaction with those around him: not only is he unfamiliar, he makes no attempt to be understood. He is preoccupied with history—"he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as he would be to cite from the moderns." (L.87)

Captain Vere cares little whether he is understood:

He seemed unmindful of the circumstance that to his bluff company such remote allusions, however pertinent they might really be, were altogether alien to men whose reading was mainly confined to the journals. (L.87)

This solipsistic trait invites comparison with Billy's bizarre mode of interacting. The autism lapses over from character to character; both men are cut off, unaware, and without rapport. Vere's behavioural patterns are certainly consistent with his epithet, "Starry Vere."

C. John Claggart

The narrator's evasive tactics are apparent in the presentation of John Claggart. The note of non-commitment is again sounded: "His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it." (L.88) To him "falls the duty of preserving order on the populous lower gun decks." (L.89) The description of Claggart as "a sort of chief of police" (L.89) emphasizes
his function. He, like Billy, is appraised in classical Grecian terms, in phraseology, evoking the inanimate, the narrator going so far as to attribute to him a "hue of time-tinted marbles of old." (L.91) His face is "notable"; the hand, like Billy's, "shapely." He is "no ill figure upon the whole" (L.90) except for his chin which displays a "protuberant broadness." (L.90) His Greek-like curls fall about a pallid face, and this pallor, although "in part the result of his official seclusion from the sunlight," in fact "seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution of the blood." (L.91) Attention is drawn to Claggart's eye, a locus to which the narrator frequently returns. The narrator also points out the master-at-arms' background noting its elevated station--"he looked like a man of high quality: (L.92) like Billy and Vere. He also notes its mysteriousness--"Nothing was known of his former life" (L.92) and it is suggested that he, perhaps, had perpetrated "some mysterious swindle. . . ." (L.93) Claggart's earlier counterpart is Bland in White-Jacket: "He was a neat and gentlemanly villain, and broke his biscuit with a dainty hand."\textsuperscript{10} "He it is whom all sailors hate,"\textsuperscript{11} in spite of the fact that he "was no vulgar dirty knave."\textsuperscript{12}

The chapter introducing Claggart contains two features of importance. The narrator re-iterates the notion of impressment. Quite naturally the crew would contain many
felons, petty criminals, "insolvent debtors," along with "promiscuous lame ducks of morality" (L.96), yet the implication is that the ship is a floating prison containing "the least influential class of mankind" (L.97) and the historical fact in the description tends to be overridden by a moral pronouncement which defines the crew as scum, and, to define them in this manner is to provide justification for treating them so; apropos of this, Gabriel Marcel writes, that the being whom one seeks to degrade is not necessarily the being in whom one has recognized a certain initial dignity. On the contrary, it may be just because one has denied the existence of this initial dignity that one has recourse to such methods. 13

The narrator digresses to include an anecdote to buttress the realistic illusion, and to elaborate on the frequent source of crews. Now this description of some of the wretched of the earth follows immediately on Claggart's introduction and is linked to him through the observation that the riff-raff of the ship would naturally dislike Claggart, "seeing that no man holding his office in a man-of-war can ever hope to be popular with the crew." (L.100) Implicit, too, is that Claggart would dislike the underlings, and later, in the soup episode, the master-at-arms displays both a general and specific animosity in his attack on the drummer boy.

The narrator is at pains to trace Claggart's positive qualities, yet the negative ones are couched in indirect phrases and there is often the invocation to mystery.
Claggart rose, through among other things, his "ingratiating deference to superiors" (L.102) which is "capped by a certain austere patriotism," surely an ambiguous description. On his entry to the navy he was a novitiate, a parallel to Billy's description as "a novice in the complexities of factitious life" (L.35), yet his knowledge has become sufficient to accrue to him a position of power on the boat, enough in order that he may create "mysterious discomfort" via his "understrappers" (L.103). Claggart, too, may, like Vere, exercise the evil of oppression, and that evil is later extended to include the wanton, originless and irrational.

Of particular interest in this section of the work is the account of the master-at-arms' "peculiar ferreting genius" (L.102). This image ties him to Ratcliffe and Squeak, and even the Dansker who has "small weasel eyes" (L.110) and "small ferret eyes." (L.113) The dark image encompasses the ship's crew as well.

In connection with the initial presentation of Claggart, several allusions to revolt of both the political and non-political variety, occur: the first parallels Claggart's chin with that of Titus Oates, "the historic deponent with the clerical drawl in the time of Charles II and the fraud of the alleged Popish Plot" (L.90); the digression concerning the Baltimore Negro cites "the fallen Bastille" (L.98) which is extended to include the thought that some veterans of Bunker Hill considered the possibility
that Napoleon might turn his attentions across the Atlantic to North America. Consanguine with the representation of the motifs of revolt and disintegration into the irrational, the digression concludes with the portrait of Napoleon as a "French portentous upstart from the revolutionary chaos who seemed in act of fulfilling judgment prefigured in the Apocalypse." (L.99) The psychological pre-determinism extends from the story to history which is viewed in precisely the same "prefigured" way, parenthesized by the possibility of incipient revolt. The "needs" of history must be satisfied in the same manner as the story's psychological needs.

Through Billy's relationship with the Dansker, a further aspect of his character, his over-directed desire to please, is elaborated in conjunction with the obliqueness of the old man. Billy is symbolically aloft in the foretop and takes his duties seriously, what the narrator describes as a "punctiliousness in duty" (L.105), a point on which he comes in for some chiding by his fellow crew members. A matter "under police oversight" (L.107) precipitates a "vague threat" (L.107) and to this minor reproof, Billy responds with "unconcealed anxiety." (L.107) The source of his agitation is the flogging he witnessed the day following his unpressment, Billy's behaviour is obsequious; he is anxious to respond in the manner in which he feels he is expected to respond.
The dialogue between Billy and the Dansker as well as the description of the Dansker, who, as another father-figure serves the function of elaborating the father-son theme as well as dilating upon the nature of evil and the genesis of the "vague threat." The character of the Dansker, a man who has been the brunt of power, "subordinated lifelong to the will of others" (L.116), is treated archetypally in antiquarian terms: he is "wizened," "time-tinted," his skin is like "antique parchment" (L.108). The Dansker, as with all the other characters is "distanced" by the narrator's treatment of him in supra-human terms at a quasi-mythic level, or under the guise of history, or by means of an aesthetic distance, i.e., that he is relating a narrative, which is further distanced by the perpetually shifting, ambiguous, non-committal, and at times contradictory point of view; for example, the narrator's query as to whether the Dansker noticed "something which in contrast with the warship's environment looked oddly incongruous in the Handsome Sailor." (L.110) What the Dansker saw is not revealed; it is passed off with another query as to "what might befall a nature like that" (L.111) and the incident concludes with the intimation that the Dansker in his "pithy guarded cynicism" holds the key to the "mystery," (again the emphasis) which the "novice," Billy, seeks to find. The repeated use of the word "novice" suggests not only a religious tone but the element of ritual as well, which
is sustained by the literary and religious appendages of the story and its psychology.

The image of chance and involition as well as the intimation of seduction appear in the lines describing Billy as "dropped into a world not without some mantraps and against whose subtleties simple courage lacking experience and address, and without any touch of defensive ugliness, is of little avail." (L.111) The father-son relationship between Billy and the Dansker, although quite different than the role of son Billy plays to Vere the father, invokes a paternalism tainted with malice, perceptible in the advice the Dansker gives: Claggart is pleasant because he is intent on doing harm. The insipid character of the Dansker also conveys a sentimentalism, reflected in the narrator's tone.

The incident concerning the soup offers a concrete model of the Dansker's speculations, and the entire description exudes an aura of perversity: the cleanliness of the newly scrubbed deck is besmirched by "the greasy liquid" (L.117), "that greasy fluid streaming before his feet. . . ." (L.143) Claggart "ejaculates" a response when he realizes who is responsible, the ambivalent, "Handsomely done, my lad: And handsome is as handsome did it, too:" (L.119) The narrator equates the master-at-arms' smile with a grimace, and the reader notes the malice in the remark, and although Billy thinks he does, he is swayed by the responses of his
messmates who laugh, causing Billy to join in feeling secure in the belief that Claggart is not after him at all. The narrator's description of the cut at the drummer-boy and the following description of Claggart's movements reveal the latent mood:

Meantime that functionary, resuming his path, must have momentarily worn some expression less guarded than that of the bitter smile, usurping the face from the heart—some distorting expressions perhaps, . . . . (L.121)

The drummer-boy is left "disconcerted." (L.121) The entire incident is ponderous with anal and sexual symbolism: reference to "greasy soup," the postures of the principals involved, the notion of "soiling," the taint of Calvinistic orthodoxy, which is connected to the religious motif, and specifically to Billy when he is later manacled; the Adamic experience and the transition of innocence to sapience are all here. The language, too, of the narrator is cathected: having stepped over the soup and checked the urge "to ejaculate something hasty" (L.119), Claggart "playfully tapped him from behind with his rattan." (L.119) The real desire has been subrogated into a symbolic gesture, but the transgressions have been committed.

The soup incident is followed by a series of rhetorical questions, questions which underlie the whole work. Three times the phrase that the Dansker used in his explication to Billy, are repeated. Why, indeed should "Jemmy Legs . . . be 'down' on the Handsome Sailor?" (L.123) The narrator
answers that it is "at heart," a fact expounded at great length as if the answer were to be found in exploratory surgery, and "not for nothing, as the late chance encounter may indicate to the discerning." (L.123) Surely this is a piece of equivocation: how chance is the encounter and to what extent does it provide any form of justification for the ensuing actions? Furthermore, the connotations of the phrase "down on him," express a desire to overpower, and to some extent subjugate in a sexual sense.

The rhetorical questions parenthesize the elaboration of Claggart's organic defect, which is tied in to the narrator's more specific phrasing of the other important thematic elements of the work. The origin of Claggart's dislike of Billy is para-logical, or perhaps meta-logical; it is--and again appears the oft-repeated word-mysterious.

For what can more partake of the mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals by the mere aspect of some other mortal however harmless he may be, if not called forth by this very harmlessness itself? (L.125)

This "Dostoevskian" quality, contends the narrator, can be apprehended by realizing that Claggart is not "normal" and "one must"therefore "cross 'the deadly space between'" (L.126). Indeed, to extend the metaphor, one must also cross the spaces within, for it is the inner distance between each aspect of characterization that must be grasped, i.e., each character that creates the tension of the story. When it is incumbent upon the narrator to explain, typically,
he retreats with the remark that the best method to proceed is "by indirection" (L.126) and through a series of apologetic convolutions made upon the analogy, the reader is told that the narrator "may" see the point of it "now." (L.129) Moreover, since "Holy Writ" is no longer accorded authority, the narrator must turn to another source; nevertheless, the presentation which follows is so Biblical in tenor and reference, it makes the narrator's preceding remarks nonsensical. Already Claggart has been called "the direct reverse of a saint" (L.126), a man without a "normal nature" (L.126). To this is added the observation that in him inheres a "'Natural Depravity:' a depravity according to nature." (L.131) Within a short space, the narrator records that the master-at-arms' depravity has "no vulgar alloy of the brute" (L.131) in it, that it "partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual" (L.132), that it "was no vulgar form of the passion" (L.139), nor was it anything so base as "that streak of apprehensive jealousy." (L.140) As if this is not enough, the narrator twice disavows any affiliation with Holy Writ, (L.130 & 135) yet connects the etiology of Claggart's evil with the Biblical phrase a "mystery of iniquity." (L.135) The etiological assignment of evil to these phrases which are assuredly Biblical in tone and which the narrator is at pains to disassociate from the Bible serves really to reinforce the connection. And therefore the etiology transcends the merely human; it is not "engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or
licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short, "'a depravity according to nature'" (L.134). It is, like the characters themselves, and the literary allusions, elevated; Claggart's depravity is cerebral, not sensual, "dominated by intellectuality" (L.131) and nobly exists above the body.

Civilization aids in the process of nurturing and cloaking the depravity: "Civilization, especially of the austerer sort, is auspicious to it." (L.131) Earlier, Claggart's patriotism had been described as austere, and that austerity, for the narrator, is linked to intellectuality for which Claggart is struck upon the brow.
CHAPTER III

MADNESS, PERCEPTUAL FAILURE AND CHARACTERIZATION

"There is a wisdom that is woe;
but there is a woe that is madness."

Moby-Dick

So I, being young, till now ripen not to reason;
And touching now the point of human skill,
Reason becomes the marshal to my will
And leads me to your eyes.

A Mid-Summer Night's Dream
II, iii.
The dominant theme of madness is first orchestrated at length in the following passage:

But the thing which in eminent instances signalizes so exceptional a nature is this: Though the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. That is to say: Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound. These men are madmen, and of the most dangerous sort, for their lunacy is not continuous, but occasional, evoked by some special object; it is protectively secretive, which is as much as to say it is self-contained, so that when, moreover, most active it is to the average mind not distinguishable from sanity, and for the reason above suggested: that whatever its aims may be--and the aim is never declared--the method and the outward proceeding are always perfectly rational. (L.133-134)

The discussion of madness is later counterpointed within the context of Vere's decisions at the court martial, but it is within these two poles that the ensuing action of the story occurs. Now the point of Claggart's lunacy is that it "is not continuous, but occasional, evoked by some special object," and although it is psychologically evident what it is in Billy that prompts the hatred, the narrator is barely suggestive. The question of madness is explicitly posited in the order/disorder formulation so germane to the book. Claggart would seem to "riot" in contravention to "the law of reason," a phrase making the equation direct. Expressed here is a real fear not only of the imminence of possible madness, the flight into the irrational, but by analogy a
collapse of law and order with a subsequent degeneration into anarchy. The description of madness suggests the classical pattern of the psychopath with his covert aims, but most of all his exterior qualities imparting composure and coolness.

The narrator identifies Claggart's "mania of an evil nature" with the motivation of the story:

The point of the present story turning on the hidden nature of the master-at-arms has necessitated this chapter. With an added hint or two in connection with the incident at the mess, the resumed narrative must be left to vindicate, as it may, its own credibility. (L.135)

This chapter's conclusion reinforces the importance of the soup incident and presents, again, the narrator's attempt to remain on neutral ground. The observation is interesting also in that it draws attention to the believability of the entire story. The incidents at the barest level of activity place some strains upon the reader's credibility, but the mythic superstructure with its elements of romance and abstraction create disbelief. The story is called a narrative, and allowing for the unfinished quality of the work, it is hardly a narrative at all; it is part pseudo-history, part sketch, part story with the extrapolations of a narrator, directing the reader's attention here and there, and at other times directing his attention away from areas that may seem crucial in offering valid and insightful channels into the story. It is those areas away from which the reader is directed, that must be investigated in the expec-
tation of resolving Melville's hermeneutics.

The beginning of Chapter 12 recapitulates several of Claggart's features. It re-emphasizes a dominant characteristic of Billy, in its explanation "as to what it was that had first moved him against Billy, namely his significant personal beauty" (L.137). Billy's beauty is the object of Claggart's "envy and antipathy" (L.137). Envy, the narrator points out, drawing a peculiar distinction between it and jealously which he has just ruled out, is "universally felt to be more shameful than even felonious crime." (L.138) It breeds in the heart and is impervious to any kind of reason. Through Claggart's eyes we are presented with a somewhat perverse, lackrmosoe portrait of Billy: the master-at-arms is described as responding "magnetically" (L.140) to Billy; he views Billy "askance" because of his kind nature:

To him, the spirit lodged within Billy, and looking out from his welkin eyes as from windows, that ineffability it was which made the dimple in his dyed cheek, supplled his joints, and dancing in his yellow curls made him pre-eminently the Handsome Sailor. (L.141)

Even this kewpie-doll presentation carries the overtones of a spirit entrapped mechanically within a body. Claggart viewing Billy from this stance, seeks to destroy him, and the destruction of a person involves the corporeal as the story attests. The narrator, after the passage quoted above, turns to sublimated writing to demonstrate that because Claggart sees "into" Billy he wants to destroy him, yet the
description reverts again to the exalted terminology: Claggart is "the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd." (L.141) With this passage is introduced the curious and recurrent word 'phenomenon,' defined in the primary sense as a situation or event that can be described. Ironically, it is only Claggart who can perceive, or describe it.Implicitly attendant is the Kantian notion of the noumenon, the object of a non-sensuous, intellectual apprehension. Another meaning of phenomenon can be the intuition of a thing as it appears to, and is constructed by the perceiver, and this particular interpretation of Claggart's mode of perception seems to be the most satisfactory within the overall context of the fiction: all the perceptions of the characters, including the narrator are highly interior. The argument concerning Claggart's ability to perceive Billy, is on the surface, parasensical--because he perceives the moral beauty, he wants to destroy it; there is a certain coherence if the reader accepts the "mystery" of which the narrator often speaks; however, the tautology remains unless it is recognized that the narrator first presents the physical aspect (in the above description, it is the sadistic view) of the situation, then leaps to the metaphysical. The narrator betrays himself, when, in the next sentence, he refers to Claggart's insight as intensifying his "passion" leading to his "disdain of innocence." (L.141) Claggart
wishes to violate innocence and having this urge can do nothing other than realize it: he can, "in an aesthetic way" esteem Billy, "but he despaired of it." (L.141) In the concluding paragraph of the chapter, the underlying philosophic fatalism becomes transparent:

With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, 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 it. (L.142)

Claggart is possessed by the "elemental evil" and must act accordingly. Jointly, all the characters have this overwhelming urge to act out their part, a part the narrator, and Melville himself at some remove, have devised for them. There is present the longing in nihilism for denial, despair and madness; the narrator attempts to attribute this entrapment to a kind of Websterian metaphysical evil afoot in the universe, from which derives the rationale for the characters: ultimately, it becomes debased to a variant of the Nuremburg slogan, "I was acting on orders." Therefore no person is forced to accept the responsibility for his own actions within the human universe; the responsibility for the actions is ultimately relegated to God, or someone acting out the part of God, in this case, the heavenly commander, Captain Vere.
Chapter 13 appears to serve almost a musical function in its elaboration and embellishment of the central strains of the work. Several allusions stated earlier are repeated and the build-up of the provocation is continued. The "spilled soup" figures again, adduced as part of the "external provocations" (L.144), and this incident, may, the narrator guardedly offers, be taken as "the sly escape of a spontaneous feeling on Billy's part more or less answering to the antipathy on his [Claggart's] own." (L.144) Although this is suggested tentatively by the narrator, later on in the chapter it is stated quite explicitly that Claggart's conscience is "lawyer to his will" in "arguing that the motive to Billy in spilling the soup must when he did, together with the epithets alleged . . . made a strong case against him." (L.150) Thus Claggart acts out of a wilfull misconstruction of an incident, or to phrase it in terms of the psychology of character—he rationalizes the incident after he volitionally mis-perceives it. His perceptions become intentionally confused in a manner congruent with what he wants to see.

Squeak is a character who seems to have received little or no critical attention; this is all the more curious because he is an extension of the underground man, Claggart, as the Fedallah is another 'self' of Captain Ahab. Claggart's 'extended self' is patently rat-like, and the narrator employs the word "ferreting" (L.145) to capture his manner;
the term has been noticed earlier in the description of Claggart's rise. The characterization in *Billy Budd*, *Sailor* owes much to the earlier portraits of the master-at-arms and his crony, Sneak, the counterpart to Squeak, in *White-Jacket*, who are described as "gifted with a marvelous perseverance in ferreting out culprits." Claggart and the characters affiliated with him inhabit the lower regions, the bowels of the boat, as it were, reflecting the story's 'dark' segment of the dichotomy between mind and body, reason and impulse. The motivation of the character of Vere as the central figure is split into two others, Budd and Claggart. To a greater or lesser extent all three characters fluctuate between being mind and body: Vere attempts to remain and function as pure rationality, ("pure" meaning unalloyed sexual innocence); his rationality is a by-product of his repression. Claggart is associated with the underside, with the darkness of the hold; he is fecal. Of aesthetic importance is the quality conveyed by the animality of the characters. Squeak is a complete lackey, fawning on Claggart and acting as an additional source for slander, "inventing . . . contumelious epithets he claimed to have overheard him [Billy] let fall." (L.146) Hence the justification is augmented. The character of Squeak offers another instance of action according to preconception--Squeak acts the way he thinks Claggart wants him to act, a parallel to Billy's acts. It is odd how all the characters are so acutely
responsive to the unusual and psychopathic signals each of the other characters transmits, and even more strange is that this action constitutes the basis of the story, which is, in a number of different ways, upwardly sublimated.

The theme of madness is reiterated in the paragraph that concludes the chapter. The reader's attention is again drawn to the secretiveness of the madness: "An uncommon prudence is habitual with the subtler depravity, for it has everything to hide." (L.148) What precisely is it that must be hidden, or perhaps repressed? The secret intent, the metaphysical evil, is, in fact, sexual: because it is so secret, the narrator continues, it is cut off "from enlightenment or disillusion" (L.148), a trenchant phrase in the light of the work's jamming of insight. And where there is neither enlightenment or disillusion, there seeps in the nihilism that infected Melville's later years. Claggart then acts "upon surmise" and action grows out of irrationality. Claggart's inner workings are elaborated, although the reader is left with the somewhat controverted account of his motivation. Claggart is depicted as possessing cunning intelligence, yet he purportedly acts out of irrational motives. His forehead centralizes the characterization, that part of the anatomy which Billy strikes. It conceals a conscience that is "the lawyer to his will" (L.150); he will act regardless of any other considerations, simply out of that force which impels him to destroy Billy's
purity. He is that revolutionary, a secret subversive force of evil; the narrator deploys the analogy with Guy Fawkes, a murky figure wont to act in the lower levels--"prowling in the hid chambers underlying some natures like Claggart's." (L.150) The narrator notes that Claggart's retaliation is disproportionate to the provocation: "for when in anybody was revenge in its exactions aught else but an inordinate usurer?" (L.149), an observation which invites comparison with Vere's later meting out of punishment in an avenging manner, applying the eye-for-an-eye law of the Old Testament, now translated into Naval Code. The narrator draws back from direct statement with the equivocation that Claggart had initially been intent on testing Billy's mettle, and from that position had degenerated into citing the mess incident as a rationalization for action. The sexual significance of the episode has been noted; as such it provides the clue for the solution of "the clandestine persecution of Billy." (L.151)

The prologue to the core incident develops a sleepy, hazy mood. Billy, characteristically, responds affirmatively when asked to go to the front of the ship; his actions are those of an automaton—he "mechanically rose" and moved to the arranged meeting place. Billy's response to the invitation to join those impressed into service in a rebellious act, of course by none other than an agent of Claggart, is to threaten the tempter. The ambiguity of the dialogue absolves Billy from total recognition of the significance;
he, under stress, lapses into a stutter with his unknown interlocutor. Certainly he realizes that something is amiss, but his reply, "D--d--damme, I don't know what you are d--d--driving at, or what you mean . . ." (L.158) permits him to retain his moral beauty by having rejected the shipmate, and he remains untainted; the action is operating at the level of negated insight. Yet, at the same time, it is underlined that Billy's nature, and for Melville part of being good-natured is the ability to acquiesce, has an Achilles' heel; this "weakness inseparable from essential good nature" (L.154), is "a reluctance, almost an incapacity of plumply saying no . . ." (L.154) A significant notion of the chapter is the elaboration of the controlling theme of revolution. Precisely what is to be revolted against remains unclear since Billy cuts off the tempter with a threat--in terms of the story, the connection with the impressed men and their discontent is readily apparent; at the psychological level, clearly, the sexual is operative, as the discussion with the Dansker elucidates.

Billy's bewilderment by the nocturnal events, and the afterguardsman's subsequent nods involves at least some comprehension that it "must involve evil of some sort . . ." (L.162) and Billy is driven to the limits of his ability to ascertain the import. Finally he consults the Dansker, but before this he suffers some mental anguish: "The ineffectual
speculations into which he was led were so disturbingly alien to him that he did his best to smother them," (L.166) says the narrator, in a telling image, one which simultaneously nullifies the intellect and presages a later reference to Billy at the scene of the accusation. Never does it occur to Billy to report the incident, but feeling he must tell someone, he turns to the Dansker who links the incident with Claggart. To Billy's surprised rejoinder, the Dansker suggests: "A cat's-paw, a cat's-paw!" This equivocation has two connotations, as Editors Hayford and Sealts explain in their Notes and Commentary: It may mean "a light puff of air" (L.169), as the narrator suggests, but he does not elaborate on the "subtler relation to the afterguardsman" (L.169) The second meaning, as the editors point out, is "good-looking seamen employed to entice volunteers. . . ." This double-entendre, which the editors fail to explore, is crucial. The Dansker has linked the temptation incident to Claggart and his afterguardsman; the "subtler relation" connects the phrase "cat's-paw" with the afterguardsman, who is, in fact, Claggart's agent. The temptation is reduced to the most bodily of terms—the homosexual seduction of men into the navy, and this is paralleled with Claggart's physical enticement of Billy to the side of rebellion.

Why it should be rebellion becomes clearer during the movement of the novella. Ostensibly speaking of rebellion in the moral and political realm, Melville is also
dealing with the philosophically sexual in the mutiny of the body, the rebellion of the flesh which here surfaces in the afterguardsman's overtures to Billy. A linguistic analysis of the description shows once more the repetition of the words having "dark" connotations--the temptation is depicted as having occurred "in underhand intriguing fashion . . ." (L.161); Billy's response as "disgustful recoil" (L.162); and his unwillingness to report the event because it would be "the dirty work of a telltale" (L.167); finally, the Dansker's explanation as "Jemmy Legs is down on you. . . ." (L.168)

Billy's inability to penetrate the experiences offers an instance of the narrator's role in the drama: the reader is told that Billy is not ready to ascribe to Claggart the source of antipathy, for the reason that Billy is "much of a child-man" (L.170), and unlike a child passing from childhood to adulthood, losing his innocence in the accretion of experience and intelligence, Billy had advanced in intelligence "while yet his simplemindedness remained for the most part unaffected." (L.171) Billy's one-dimensionality is being explained, or rather, being explained away; the narrator acknowledges that his intelligence had advanced, which is to say, that he is in possession of some intelligence, yet the qualifications surrounding the description have the effect of discounting it: terms such as "simple-mindedness" not only are value-weighted, but are used in conjunction
with the notion that "some sailors in mature life remain unsophisticated enough." (L.170) To perform in the manner of a Billy Budd is to function as a robot. The authoritarian world of the novella demands pure juvenile acquiescence, both as far as the naval code is concerned as well as the psychological needs of the storyteller. Billy is excused on the basis of his youth,—"yet did Billy's years make his experience small" (L.171) and his innocent goodness has been often pronounced upon, yet this is purportedly the tragic flaw upon which hinges the motivation of the plot.

The narrator moves from the mention of Billy's youth to the pseudo-metaphysical explanation that Billy "had none of that intuitive knowledge of the bad which in natures not good or incompletely so foreruns experience. . . ." (L.171) To speak of intuitive knowledge in this context is to mystify the nature of evil: what has its origins in man, his actions and institutions is transmuted into metaphysics. What Billy experiences, or more precisely, is unable to experience, is a perceptual failure: the temptation occurs at night—"He could not distinctly see the stranger's face." (L.156) (The eyes are significant here: they occur not only in relation to the theme of vision, but also in connection with madness.); the money is waved before Billy's eyes (L.162); he is the object of Claggart's "unobserved glance (L.177); Claggart has insight into Billy (L.141),
which Billy cannot reciprocate; Billy cannot 'see'; he cannot identify the activities that are directed against him by those surrounding him; furthermore, he cannot see in—he lacks in-sight, or any self-reflective quality. For him there is no comprehension of others' motives—neither can he see 'out': "Had the fortopman been conscious of having done or said anything to provoke the ill will of the official, it would have been different with him, and his sight might have been purged if not sharpened." (L.182) This description crystalizes the theme of vision and it extends the psychological mechanism of the tale, for it is perceptual failure that the narrator sublimates into a supra-human idea.

The idea must exist beyond the human, for to perceive the nature of the master-at-arms' antagonism would be to give away the nature of the motive, to make overt the underlying impulse of the novella. R. D. Laing observes that, "Our behaviour is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things." Billy is compatible with his experience; he acts as if he sees nothing, and although Billy may strike the reader as a-human, the tale still considers a series of acts perpetrated by some men on other men. To avoid consideration of these acts in humanistic terms, is to fall prey to what Laing calls "mystification." Substituting a discussion of the story's 'form' and accepting the implications of the tale uncritically are tantamount to retreating into the immorality and
irresponsibility of what Alex Comfort has labelled "the contemplation of absolute form," a stance, "which while it represents the purest aesthetic consideration, is deficient in human responsibility."^5

The narrator misleadingly points out that Billy knows life as a sailor only. Obviously some portion of his life must have been spent in another environment, yet this type of characterization is in harmony with the narrator's attempt to withdraw from the reality of character. Why should sailors be "in character a juvenile race. Even their deviations are marked by juvenility. . . ."? (L.173) Making them juvenile allows for more manipulation in their actions; however, the narrator, quite explicitly remarks that life on board ship, unlike life on land, is "no intricate game of chess where few moves are made in straightforwardness . . . ." (L.172) This is telling, for why would the narrator expressly want motives and moves reduced to quintessential simplicity, particularly when he repeatedly mentions how difficult it is, even impossible, to single out and focus on an absolute? In short, the whole novella is purportedly an attempt to capture a mood, a feeling, an ultimate explanation.

The approach/avoidance position of the narrator is explicit in the final paragraph of Chapter 16 which explains quite distinctly why he negates any analogy between the world of the sailor and the complex game of chess: because
"Every sailor, too, is accustomed to obey orders without debating them; his life afloat is externally ruled for him; he is not brought into that promiscuous commerce with mankind. . . ." (L.174) It is that "promiscuous commerce" that "soon teaches one that unless upon occasion he exercise a distrust keen in proportion to the fairness of the appearance, some foul turn may be served him." (L.174) The world of the dream yields to the flesh of daily bitterness, revealing the narrator's desire to retreat into a private world. Implicit, too, in this description is a correspondence between pre-lapsarian man and the world of the sailor. The analogy bears certain inconsistencies. Imagistically, Billy is pre-Adamic man, yet the conclusion of the story is overlaid with the Christ motif. Billy's world is pre-lapsarian, but Claggart inhabits a fallen world, where a "depravity according to nature" can exist. Can Billy then be excused on the confused grounds of operating in a world that historically post-dates him? The answer would seem to lie in the direction of Billy's juvenility; he is inexperienced, he is young, but most of all he is a sailor. But so too are Claggart and Vere, sailors who exist in a hermetic world, an impressed world of no volition, subject to the command-response principle. This hermetic world resists application to anything outside of itself. In other words, it is an attempt to explain, in a private vocabulary, something problematic for the narrator--the desire to negate
the insight into the nature of the 'sin', for he has per-
ceived both violator (Vere) and violated (Budd), and instead
of confronting the source wishes to substitute the 'story'
while in the process of carrying this out encounters conflict
with his own perceptions. The following passage provides
such an instance: Claggart eyes Billy,

with a settled meditative and melancholy expression,
his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish
tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of
sorrows. Yes, and sometimes the melancholy
expression would have in it a touch a soft yearning,
as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for
fate and ban. (L.178)

Fate and ban are integral parts of the taboo; the
desire is transmuted into a perverted kind of sorrow, finally
to be repressed: "But this was an evanescence, and quickly
repented of. . . ." (L.179) It is replaced immediately by
a look of unmitigated violence; brutality and savagery
keynote the response: "upon any abrupt unforeseen encounter
a red light would flash forth from his eye like a spark from
an anvil in a dusk smithy." (L.179) One more time, there
is the reference to the mode of perceiving which is linked
both to colour and madness, themes pervading the work and
evinced more fully in the later chapters.

The narrator once again brings out Billy's unawareness:
"And the thews of Billy were hardly compatible with that
sort of sensitive spiritual organization which in some cases
instinctively conveys to ignorant innocence an admonition
of the proximity of the malign." (L.181) Billy accepts
Claggart at face value: "As it was, innocence was his blinder." (L.182) Billy's two flaws, his stutter and his inability to perceive, produce part of the entanglements leading to his violation. Not only are the major characters violated; the narrator's diction suggests that Claggart's henchmen, in this instance the two minor officers, have "been some way tampered with: as their "glance" (again, the word appears) is directed at Billy. (L.183) But Billy is meant to remain an enigma of innocence; he has no reference to externality, and therefore would not do anything so bold as to confront his shipmates directly, with a view to fathoming the situation, suggests the narrator addressing those "shrewd ones" of his audience. But, the narrator nudges us,—something else than mere shrewdness is perhaps needful for the due understanding of such a character as Billy Budd's." (L.187)

Juxtaposed with this mysterious admonition, is a further reference to Claggart's monomania, a condition which the narrator is at pains to undercut and qualify by the remark, "if that indeed it were." (L.188) This is consonant with his usual manner of attempting to diffuse. Insanity masquerades as reason; "in general covered over by his self-contained and rational demeanor..." (L.188) Billy is vaguely aware since the narrator mentions that he "thought the master-at-arms acted in a manner rather queer at times." (L.181) The source of the monomania, extending the image of the "hid chambers" of Guy Fawkes, is "like a subterranean
fire . . . eating its way deeper and deeper in him." (L.188)

For Claggart, the oral masochist, the swallow is the reflex action internalizing his hatred of others. Externally his rebellion manifests itself in neat verbalization, accompanied by an organized, charming and seductive manner. Interestingly he is the only character in the story who possesses an inner life of emotion. Granted that his passions are undirected, hostile, confused, resentful, or evil, to use the narrator's term, he is, however, the only character whose presentation indicates a vulnerability, a capacity to feel and to be hurt, i.e., to respond to Billy Budd erotically. Is this any worse than either Billy's incapacity, or the aestheticized detachment of the narrator and Captain Vere?
CHAPTER IV

THE CRISIS

"But manly greatness men can span,
And feel the bonds that draw."

"On the Photograph of a Corps Commander"
Just prior to Claggart’s confrontation with the Captain, the Bellipotent, "at times on detached service" (L.190) and at that moment, "at her furthest remove from the fleet" (L.191) pursues a frigate. The account here, re-establishes the extent of separation, the cut-offness: the alienated microcosm, poetically adrift on a disinterested sea. The detachment is echoed throughout in the characters' interrelations, patent in the mode in which unconscious facial expression, mannerisms and glances occur. Among other passages cited, there is Captain Vere's response to the master-at-arms:

No sooner did the commander observe who it was that now deferentially stood awaiting his notice than a peculiar expression came over him. It was not unlike that which uncontrollably will flit across the countenance of one at unawares encountering a person who, though known to him indeed, has hardly been long enough known for thorough knowledge, but something in whose aspect nevertheless now for the first provokes a vaguely repellent distaste. (L.195)

The mention of the covert quality of the expression is in keeping with the general air of mystery and there is resemblance to Billy's response to the afterguardsman, as a "disgustful recoil. . . ." (L.162) The 'dirty' Claggart emerges "from his cavernous sphere. . . ." (L.192) to approach Vere who further on in the interchange disbelieves the information, while the narrator insists that the Captain is acquainted with the ship's "secret mines and dubious side. . . ." (L.203) Claggart proceeds to make the accusation
and it is of interest to note that linguistically he is referred to as a "testifier" (L.199) who is "giving his testimony." He addresses Vere as "your honor" (L.200) throughout the scene. It is as if the accusation were the actual trial itself.

Explaining his intention to avert another Nore, Claggart lights on the central image of Vere's horror phantasy; "his face altering with anger" (L.200) Vere responds with outrage: "Under the circumstances he was indignant at the purposed allusion." (L.200) For two reasons Vere attempts to play down the situation. In the first place, he feels much has to be "popularly disclaimed," and the reader's attention is re-directed to a consideration of the popularized (i.e., the ballad) and to the true account, (the naval records), or, in terms of the other poles established in the literary framework, the inside versus the outside narrative. Secondly, to recognize the situation would be to accord it weight, to draw attention to it, "to keep the idea of lingering disaffection alive" (L.203), and any intimation in this direction has to be wholeheartedly suppressed.

Vere reacts with astonishment to Claggart's naming of Budd as the offender. Claggart's sexual metaphor, "A mantrap may be under the ruddy-tipped daisies" (L.207) presents Billy in the posture of revolutionary tempter.¹ Vere has been pleased with Lieutenant Ratcliffe for having impressed "such a fine specimen of the genus homo, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before
the Fall." (L.208) The religious allegorizing in the
description is self-explanatory, but it fails to negate or
de-intensify the sexual. Vere had not seen anything amiss
in Billy's spontaneous outburst, indeed, he has been
struck by the foretopman's acquiescence, "admiring the
spirit that could take an arbitrary enlistment so merrily
and sensibly." (L.209) In a reference which elaborates the
dehumanized condition of Billy as object, he is described
in a phrase that would warm the heart of any capitalist, as
a "King's bargain," "that is to say, for His Britannic
Majesty's navy a capital investment at small outlay or none
at all." (L.211) The economic equation further objectifies
the human.

On the other hand, Claggart assumes a self-righteous
air with an appropriate pose: "erecting himself as in
vrituous self-assertion . . .", while the Captain, whose
"moral quality" enabled him to act as a "veritible touch-
stone" for his fellow mortals, is unable to gain access to
"what was really going on . . ." (L.214) in Claggart. This
is another instance of denied insight and solipscism. The
aura of secrecy is sustained by the way in which Vere has
Billy summoned and is carried through in a heightened manner
by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the Captain's cabin where
the participants are, to use the narrator's word, "closeted."
(L.219)

The impression of closeness, of imprisonment anticipates
later developments (i.e., Vere's decision to put Billy in
"confinement" L.234 and later in chains), and elaborates the essential captivity of the inmates and the ship. As a preface to the confrontation, Billy's innocent nature is remarked upon as "an immature nature essentially honest and humane . . . " (L.220); indeed, this innocence is the subject of such repeated insistence that it becomes questionable. At a certain level of the narrator's awareness, not only is Billy's behaviour acquiescent, but complicitous as well—that is to say, he is participating in the ritual homosexual offering that Claggart has been setting before Vere. Yet the narrator suggests as a diametric alternative, a rather simplified construction: he does not describe the mental process, but in a stiff piece of stylistism, he injects the thinking into Billy:

The only thing that took shape in the young sailor's mind was this: Yes, the captain, I have always thought, looks kindly upon me. Wonder if he's going to make me his coxswain. I should like that. And may be now he is going to ask the master-at-arms about me. (L.220)

One might be inclined to dismiss this as indulged writing if it were not so revelatory: Billy's innocence and naivety border on both the pastoral and the idealized to an unbelievable degree. What emerges here is Billy's desire to be recognized, to be a cynosure, which is in part, a conscious wish, or at least evident enough in the description to be labelled conscious. The son seeks recognition from the father, and his aspiration to be coxswain supports this view. The term coxswain is psychologically loaded both in
terms of vulgar slang--after all Billy wants to be his coxswain--and in terms of the phonetic sound --s'n² --i.e. son; etymologically "swain" derives from "son", and lexically carries the meaning of not only a rustic individual, but a lover as well, hence the term can be said to fit for a variety of reasons. The entire description of the confrontation and the ensuing action is so cathedected and electric with significance that careful scrutiny reveals the distillation of the various themes and images of the work:

> With the measured step and calm collected air of an asylum physician approaching in the public hall some patient beginning to show indications of a coming paroxysm, Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy and, mesmerically looking him in the eye, briefly recapitualted the accusation. (L.221)

The air of deliberation, "the measured step" reveals the underlying intention and simultaneously anticipates the "measured forms" of Captain Vere as he imposes order; ritually, the two roles of active and passive are enacted with the foreshadowing of the actual paroxysm which does take place in the pre-ordained fashion endemic to the whole novella. The description focuses on the eye, that index of mental equilibrium which in this passage is located by the "air of an asylum." Claggart's look is dealt "mesmerically," and the paragraph immediately following the one quoted above repeats the idea of mesmerism while cataloguing the change in Claggart's eyes:
Not at first did Billy take it in. When he did, the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as by white leprosy. He stood like one impaled and gagged. Meanwhile the accuser's eyes, removing not as yet from the blue dilated ones, underwent a phenomenal change, their wonted rich violet color blurring into a muddy purple. Those lights of human intelligence, losing human expression, were gelidly protruding like the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep. The first mesmeristic glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the paralyzing lurch of the torpedo fish. (L.222)

The oral masochism which is part of the dynamics of the work finds expression in Billy's physiological constriction; he is unwilling to "take it in," to introject it orally; the appropriate reflexive response to cut off the internalization is to choke and prevent articulation. Billy must not speak! The narrator's grotesque account of the eyes serves the manifold purposes of recording, by the fluctuation in colour, the metamorphosis in states of mind: re-iterating the detached interaction among characters--"alien eyes"; registering the process of dehumanization,--"losing human expression"; finally, providing retroactive and ongoing continuity with the description that occurs a few lines on--"the horror of the accuser's eyes . . ." (L.223) The deployment of the term "phenomenal" along with "rose-tan" and "white leprosy" connect with the later use of this exact diction reinforcing the sequence of the inevitable events to come: so too does the apt description of Billy as "one impaled and gagged." (L.222) He is literally and figuratively bound. At another level, he is also "bound" to
silence, for to speak would be to reveal. To Vere's injunction to defend himself, Billy responds even more grotesquely with a distorted aspect that brings forth his "lurking defect and in this instance for the time intensifying it into a convulsed tongue-tie. . . ." (L.223)

Billy is painted, (no pun intended), in a simile highly charged with effeminate and sacrificial terms: "like that of a condemned vestal priestess in the moment of being buried alive, and in the first struggle against suffocation." (L.224) Curiously, Billy is 'breathless,' 'out of breath' at the prompting to speak. Violence, so prominent underlying the whole of the novella, is made so overt here as to demand no gloss at all. Accompanying the violence is the perversity of the description of Billy's straining to respond: he convulses, as it were, on command, in his "eagerness to obey the injunction to speak and defend himself. . . ." (L.224)

By eliciting the "vocal impediment," authority cripples Billy. An anecdotal analogue from Captain Vere's childhood hinges on the word "impotence" and dilates on Billy's inability:

Billy's aspect recalled to him that of a bright young schoolmate of his whom he had once seen struck by much the same startling impotence in the act of eagerly rising in the class to be foremost in response to a testing question put to it by the master. (L.225)

The anecdote bears further resemblance in that Vere's schoolmate aspires, as does Billy, "to be foremost." Vere's verbal attempt to reassure Billy, spoken in "so fatherly a tone" (L.225) and the pat on the shoulder, too, prompt "more violent
efforts at utterance—efforts soon ending for the time in confirming the paralysis, and bringing to his face an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold." (L.225)
Suffering metamorphoses Adam into Christ; the stutter is tantamount to Golgotha and the fatherly father abdicates to the angry, powerful, punishing father.

The description of the attack on Claggart is written in an explicitly sexual lexicon of erectness, potency and release with reference to both sex and death: when Claggart is struck on the brow, "so shapely and intellectual-looking a feature in the master-at-arms" (L.226) (a detail inviting cross-reference to the great massive brow of Moby-Dick which is reckoned to cover nothing at all), the seat of intellectual reason is attacked—reason, for Billy is that which rationalizes and sublimates. The blow is described as "quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night . . ." (L.226), a figure of speech balancing the orgastic with the images of light and darkness as well as the concomitant notion of hiddenness, which, a few lines on, is extended to characterize Vere, who, metaphorically coming forth from darkness,

uncovered his face; and the effect was as if the moon emerging from eclipse should reappear with quite another aspect than that which had gone into hiding. The father in him, manifested towards Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced by the military disciplinarian. (L.228)

The schizoid other half emerges from behind the clouds. Vere, in an "official tone" commands Billy to a stateroom and Billy responds, "mechanically." (L.228)
When Claggart is struck he keels over, "like a heavy plank tilted from erectness." Budd and Vere raise him, from the loins up into a sitting position. The spare form flexibly acquiesced, but inertly. It was like handling a dead snake. They lowered it back. Regaining erectness, Captain Vere with one hand covering his face stood to all appearance as impassive as the object at his feet. (L.227)

Again the narrative outlines a dehumanized condition both on the part of the living and the dead. The elimination of part of the object of anxiety enables Vere to achieve a modicum of erectness. Budd's action is met with the Captain's condemnation, "Fated boy," a prophetic murmur hinting at Billy's destiny and the fact that he has been fated to be used in the phantasies of the narrator, and thus in turn in the phantasies of Vere, much as he has been used by Claggart, who in a limited sense, has been acting out his phantasies.

From the time of the "man-of-war's man's violent killing at sea of a superior in grade . . ." (L.280), Vere has been calm and reasonable. He retains his composure after lowering Claggart's body and he remains "impassive," "absorbed in taking in all the bearings of the event. . . ." (L.227) After the surgeon arrives, he goes mad: "Suddenly, catching the surgeon's arm convulsively, he exclaimed, pointing down to the body, 'It is the divine judgment on Ananias! Look!'" (L.231) Vere next exclaims: "'Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!'" (L.232) Out of the madness comes the verdict, yet the pronouncement of judgment in this
agitated state remains consistent with the remark made immediately after the attack. The narrator says that these "passionate interjections, mere incoherencies to the listener as yet unapprised of the antecedents . . ." (L.233) may be disturbing to the surgeon, but it is more than the mere antecedents that are needed to account for Vere's behaviour. The solipcistic nature of the images, with their religious overtone signal an inherent madness which is elaborated later by the speculations of the surgeon. How Vere has judged Billy guilty, tried him, sentenced him and executed him in his own head, is an aspect of the Captain's self-fulfilling prophecy.
CHAPTER V

THE TRIUMPH OF VERE'S MAD AUTHORITY

"In the martinet-mien
Read the Articles of War, heed the naval routine."

"Bridegroom Dick"

"Discipline must be; the scourge is deemed due."

"Bridegroom Dick"
The question of sanity receives further treatment in the surgeon's viewpoint and in the famous opening of the chapter on madness. Expectedly, Vere decides to hold a drumhead court, demanding of those involved participation in his "desire for secrecy. . . ." (L.233) The surgeon's speculations remain in limbo although he feels something is amiss. The narrator makes the explicit point that Vere's responses, notably the two outbursts, are "so at variance with his normal manner." (L.235) But the difference is minimal; Vere under stress simply gives vent to his normally suppressed anxiety and his subsequent actions during and following the trial serve further to illustrate his madness. The surgeon rationalizes the situation by invoking mutiny and the whole discussion is relegated to the sphere of the authoritarian framework in which each individual is complicitous with the hierarchical imperatives. The narrator is not ambiguous when he states that the surgeon, the lieutenants and captain of marines, "think that such a matter should be referred to the admiral." (L.236)

But the matter is not referred to the admiral; it remains a problem for Captain Vere and is prefaced by the narrator's rhetorical question:

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity. (L.236)
Melville's colour code associates violet with madness and Claggart, (Vere had previously been coded as grey, L.213), and from Claggart's violet, emerges, in moments of anger, "a red light." (L.179) The prolegomena to the court scene, in prose that is taut and crystalline, raises the question of sanity, parenthesizing the subsequent actions, while simultaneously linking it to the speculations of the surgeon which the narrator attempts to nullify by transferring the onus of decision-making to the reader:

Whether Captain Vere, as the surgeon professionally and privately surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford. (L.237)

This commentary authorizes the reader's own conclusion about the aberration; indeed, by limiting it to the activity of the Captain, it draws the reader's attention away from the complementary issues that involve the sanity of all the characters, particularly Claggart and Budd. In view of the aspects of the novella outlined in the thesis, there is much evidence for the conclusion that the psychopathology is pandemic. A further example of this is Billy's assistance at his own incrimination and execution. There is also the narrator's handling of the court scene, a model replete with equivocation, inconsistency and contradiction; it begins with the denial of the surety one has been left with after learning of the surgeon's speculations. One might argue that the description of the train of thought by the
surgeon is so constructed as to make it unclear whether
the narrator is raising the questions on behalf of the
surgeon, or whether they spring from the intelligence of
the narrator. The objection may be met in two ways: that
the whole story is occurring in the narrator's head and
that the distinction is therefore pointless; or secondly,
that it is a stylistic device on the part of the narrator.
In either event, the outcome remains the same, for what
emerges is the ambivalence of the storyteller, mediating
between the reader and his material, caught between his
outer direction in wanting to involve his readers in the
tale, and his secretiveness which compels him to withhold,
falsify or distort material.

Broadly speaking, the framework constructed by the
narrator for the court scene offers two sides: that the
event is historically justified and that the event is an
aberration. The event could not have happened at a worse
time,

an aftertime very critical to naval authority,
demanding from every English sea commander two qual-
ities not readily interfusable--prudence and rigor.
Moreover, there was something crucial in the
case. (L.238)

What this crucial quality is remains a mystery. Yet the
urgency grows out of the notion of insurrection and revolt--
by extension, to the unconscious level, the revolt of
suppressed impulses. And one has come to expect the
authoritarian stance of Vere; it has been outlined in his
initial presentation, repeated at the moment of the murder and it is the pivot of the line or reasoning throughout the trial. Vere's anxiety in connection with the Nore mutiny is absolutely compulsive: "Feeling that unless quick action was taken on it, the deed of the foretopman . . . would tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore. . . ." (L.244) History is invoked as rationalization, followed by the narrator's proviso, "But though a conscientious disciplinarian, he was no lover of authority for mere authority's sake," (L.244) a statement which flatly contradicts what the narrator has said about Vere to this point, and which is in opposition to his spontaneous outcry after the homicide.

The urgency for the trial is linked with the "maintenance of secrecy in the matter" and the impending trial is circumscribed by the observation that "innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places." (L.239) In fact, the innocence and guilt have really been transferred; in a charade of guilt the opprobrium is, and has been, continually shifted from character to character, resting for the moment on Billy's shoulders transferred from Vere at the time of the attack on the master-at-arms. The dimensions of good and evil are personified; what hitherto has been latently sexual is labelled as innocence and guilt--Billy has now tasted guilt which is operative both in the moral and sexual realms. Personification permits the transmogrification into elevated terms. The notion of unconscious sexual denial is further supported by the
analogy between the military offer and the monk. This is consistent with the facade of religious imagery in Billy Budd, Sailor, but at the same time apt, because in both instances the men are aliens functioning within a shrunken cosmos, subservient to duty and rites.

In his effort to remain neutral, to neutralize would perhaps be more accurate, and maintain a balance simply telling a story, the narrator on more than one occasion, does more than just equivocate, he not only fails entirely to make sense, but he introduces a note of contradiction: witness the following passage developing out of the compulsion to consider the issue in terms of personification of guilt and innocence:

The essential right and wrong involved in the matter, the clearer that might be, so much the worse for the responsibility of a loyal sea commander, inasmuch as he was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis. (L.240)

The narrator notes of Vere that "very far was he from embracing opportunities for monopolizing to himself the perils of moral responsibility . . ." (L.264), so he convenes a drum-head court in which the responsibility will be shared, while "reserving to himself, as the one on whom the ultimate accountability would rest, the right of maintaining a supervision of it, or formally or informally interposing at need." (L.245) Captain Vere, however, proceeds to dominate the court, imposing on it his viewpoint and arguments. The
narrator also indicates that certain members of the court he has convened, "might not prove altogether reliable in a moral dilemma involving aught of the tragic." (L.247) This alludes to the soldier. Where the lieutenant and sailing master are concerned, Vere feels their respective fortés were "confined to the matter of active seamanship and the fighting demands of their profession. (L.247) In short, they are rendered powerless. Vere's loss of rank is compensated for by his testifying from the weather side of the vessel, signifying his resistance.

During the trial Billy's complicity is elucidated. The acquiescence is apparent from the first moment he speaks to give credence to the Captain's charges and is followed up when he blesses the first lieutenant. Billy hesitates over the question of mutiny and then proffers a negative. Throughout the work the notion of mutiny and revolt are avoided in an almost ritualistic fashion by the characters, notably Vere, who is the most threatened. There is a magical taboo on the word and on the act. To the officer of marines' question as to Claggart's motives, Billy looks to the commander for advice, since it involves "a spiritual sphere wholly obscure to Billy's thoughts. . . . (L.254) Captain Vere proceeds to define exactly what must be considered: "the blow's consequence, which consequence justly is to be deemed not otherwise than as the striker's
Thus consideration of any other motives is ruled out. Billy, quite in character, misses the significance; he turns a "wistful interrogative look toward the speaker, a look in its dumb expressiveness not unlike that which a dog of generous breed might turn upon his master seeking in his face some elucidation of a previous gesture ambiguous to the canine intelligence." (L.257) (Much earlier, Billy's lack of insight or "self-consciousness" is considered in the same metaphor.) The signification of Vere's pronouncement is not lost on the three officers whose response confirms the captain's malady: "Couched in it seemed to them a meaning unanticipated, involving a pre-judgment on the speaker's part. It served to augment a mental disturbance previously evident enough." (L.258) To the soldier's objections, Vere counters with the evasion that the situation "is a 'mystery of iniquity,' a matter for psychologic theologians to discuss" (L.259), re-introducing the religious theme in a phrase that sheds no light on the situation and which anticipates an aspect of Vere's justification in the summation which leads him to vindicate the murder of Billy on the grounds that God will later pardon the victim: "At the Last Assizes it shall acquit." (L.273) The vacuum that is Christianity is replenished by an earthly aspirant to the throne of the great avenging punisher. Vere warns the soldier that it is the "prisoner's deed--with that alone we have to do." (L.259)
opera in which Billy sings the victim's arias, Vere plays not only the prompter, but the composer and director as well. To him Billy turns for his cues and "taking a hint from that aspect, a hint confirming his own instinct that silence was now best, replied to the lieutenant, 'I have said all, sir.'" (L.260) The "glance" Billy directs at Captain Vere maintains him under his authority where the obeisant interaction reaches its apex in the strange scene where Vere and Budd are closeted together, and the narrator, speculating on the action, surmises that Billy's response to Vere's

confession would have been received in much the same spirit that prompted it. Not without a sort of joy, indeed, he might have appreciated the brave opinion of him implied in his captain's making such a confidant of him. (L.287)

In the court, after Vere's delay "apparently in one of his absent fits . . ." (L.262), he begins to pace the cabin against the roll of the ship, "symbolizing . . . in his action a mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts strong as the wind and the sea." (L.263) Here is presented the elemental will to assertion, the repression that in acculturized form supercedes the instinctual. Vere will have his way and impose his decision: how can it be otherwise when the commander considers the men "not intellectually mature" and therefore "men with whom it was necessary to demonstrate certain principles that were axioms to himself"? (L.263)
His treatment of his fellow men is identical to his treatment of the writers he looks to for confirmation of his existing thoughts and ideas. (L.83) The description stands as an overture to Vere's rationalization, a portrait of a man destroyed by convention, mechanized and dehumanized by an abstract social code, and deranged by repression. D. H. Lawrence wrote of Herman Melville that the sea was for him the baptismal font, removing him from humanity: "Away, away from humanity. To the sea. The naked, salt, elemental sea. To go to sea, to escape humanity. The human heart gets into a frenzy at last, in its desire to dehumanize itself."

As Captain Vere works into his propaedeutics, he indicates that he has until now, "been but the witness, little more . . ." (L.265), a statement not entirely true since he had earlier "narrated all that had led up to the catastrophe . . ." (L.249), in addition to the part he played in the events. Thereafter he was specific in directing the court's attention to the side of "military duty," and away from "moral scruple" (L.264)--"it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with." (L.266) Vere embellishes the argument in terms of Nature versus the King; sailors cease "to be natural free agents. . . ." (L.268) His wordy explanation leans heavily on an authoritarian presupposition, and by making rational the irrational, demands internalization--"martial law operating through us." (L.269) Reverence to blind authority is what
Vere urges; the advocate of dehumanization pronounces that, "Our vowed responsibility is this: That however pitilessly that law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it." (L.270) The sailor is a prisoner without will, for there is no room for any individual response--"If our judgments approve the way, that is but coincidence." (L.268) Contrary to the narrator's assertion that Vere is "no lover of authority for mere authority's sake" (L.244), his position is the authoritarian's par excellence. Typically, he calls for reliance on the head, "But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool," (L.270) and the narrator has Vere call, in a phrase so appropriate, for renunciation of the feminine principle, i.e., Billy, in terms of character: "the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out." (L.270)

Vere informs the court that private conscience must yield to public and public in this instance means martial: man's behaviour must be externalized where it may be scrutinized, controlled and subjected to authority: "But 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?" (L.271) The martial framework provides the structure which reassures and tranquillizes; although Vere asks a question, we can be quite sure of the answer, and he proceeds to explain in
slightly different terms that not only are men forced to fight against their will, but "Against their conscience, for aught we know." (L.273) Captain Vere observes that, "War looks but to the frontage, the appearance. And the Mutiny Act, War's child takes after the father. Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose." (L.274) The image of the father and child serves the function of extending the strictures to cover the dictates Vere imposes on his son, Billy. The restraints within the individual prompting him to conform reflect those rigors of law imposed on the members of the state, in this case, the warship. The development of thought involves the idea of appearance, that things must be kept visible, 'out there,' where they may be handled and manoeuvred. At the same time, Vere's actions are so without any quality of self-judgment they make one wonder how any critic could have viewed them as tragic, or Vere as a "complete man of action, mind and heart" whose "experience demands that his acts proceed from an understanding of history..." His actions are amazingly self-righteous, even automatic, having been cut from the same cloth as Billy's. To the sailing master's query concerning mitigation, Vere explicates in his usual terms--mutiny. He cites "the recent outbreak at the Nore..." (L.227) That the crew would misunderstand, that it would be a shattering, for them, of "naval usage and tradition: (L.276), that it would provoke a further out-
break, are all arguments adduced by the commander:

Your clement sentence they would account pusillan-
imous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them--afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles. (L.277)

In Vere's scenario, it is really he who 'demands' codified action at the moment, "prompted by duty and the law . . ." (L.278), Vere proceeds to a remark that serves as an analogue to Billy's acquiescence and to his bizarre participation in the ensuing destruction. Vere remarks that Billy, "did he know our hearts, I take him to be of that generous nature that he would feel even for us on whom in this military necessity so heavy a compulsion is laid." (L.278) Billy is enlisted, too, as a scriptwriter in the harsh scenario. The word "compulsion" is so accurate in describing Vere's psychological dynamic that signals his retreat into "forms."

Vere's summation points out that the court has really only one choice and that must take into account whether murder "be allowed to pass for aught else than a capital crime demanding prompt infliction of the penalty." (L.280) The Captain's phrasing precludes deliberation of any alternatives, and by way of vindicating Vere's stance, the narrator cites the Somers incident, observing that the act of execution there was subsequently found justifiable by a court of enquiry ashore. Significantly the narrator does not describe the incident as being part of Vere's thinking, or modus
vivendi; rather, it is imputed that he is thinking along those lines. The fact that the narrator repeats again and again that the act has historical precedent makes one question the validity of this act on the Bellipotent. The citing of the Somers incident must be considered with reference to the earlier chapters involving the description of martial phantasies the narrator weaves around the figure of Nelson.

In spite of the extensive critical commentary that exists on the incidents of the Nore, Somers, and related naval trials, it is ultimately upon the one constructed in Billy Budd, Sailor, that judgment must rest. Precedents from other trials are in a sense irrelevant here; the author's intentions are visible in the actions of Vere who is placed against a background of naval activity. This realization is important for critical exegesis. The narrator concludes the reference to the Somers:

History, and here cited without comment. True, the circumstances on board the Somers were different from those on board the Bellipotent. But the urgency felt, well-warranted or otherwise, was much the same. (L.282)

Obviously, it is Vere who feels that it is his duty to act with haste in the matter. History cannot ever really be cited without comment, especially in the context that the narrator has created in relating these events; finally, why should the narrator refer to an incident in which he points out there is no correspondence between circumstances?
The narrator then moves to a short anecdote by "a writer whom few know . . ." (L.282), (most likely a reference to Melville himself), in which there is a decided feeling that attempts to enlist the sympathy of the reader for actions carried out "in the obscuring smoke" (L.282) of battle. The unknown writer employs an image of psychological consequence: smoke and fog—and he suggests that these ought to absolve an individual of "considerations both practical and moral . . . when it is imperative promptly to act." (L.283) The fog of blindness obscures the divination of motives and any subtlety is transformed into overt action.

Hayford and Sealts, in the notes to their edition of the novella, quote Gettman and Harkness, who contend that with respect to the incident where Captain Vere communicates the court's decision, Melville, "simply evades this scene, and that he felt embarrassed in doing so is suggested by the fact that the substitutes for it a paragraph of thin summarized conjecture about Vere's part in the interview." The observation is accurate, but it fails to go far enough. Why would Melville feel embarrassment? Indeed, much of the narrative is composed of the narrator's conjectures about and attributions to, the characters, and in this particular instance the question that comes immediately to mind is why the narrator, who has been omnipresent in all scenes, suddenly becomes a participant or onlooker no more, so that details will have to be passed on to the reader by surmise, or in the words of
the narrator--"some conjectures may be ventured." (L.286)
Is it a literary device? If so, to what purpose and what is its justification? Is Melville artistically incapable of handling this material? And if this is the case what is there in the nature of the material that makes it unwieldy?

A close look at the summary reveals that the material comes very close to the unconscious factors at work. The two men are "closeted" together "in that stateroom. . . ." (L.285) Formerly, "closeted" has been used in the description of the court scene, and although it is a conventional 19th Century term, it has an appropriateness beyond the conventional. The suggestion here of intimacy and confinement is much more marked; secrecy, another of the recurrent themes of the work occurs in this confrontation and is alluded to again with the "sacrament" of Abraham and Isaac, a riddle, "seldom if in any case revealed to the gadding world. . . ." (L.288) The narrator writes that the two were "each radically sharing in the rarer qualities of our nature--so rare indeed as to be all but incredible to average minds however much cultivated. . . ." (L.286) The narrator pretends obtuseness as to what the rarer quality is; it is relegated to that shadowly, unknowable transcendant sphere, although through the narrator's duplicity the quality can be recognized as love. The narrator speculates that, "it is not improble that such a confession would have been received in much the same spirit that prompted it." (L.287)
Billy's participation in his ritual slaughter is engaged. The sexual guilt is implicit in Captain Vere's need to justify his behaviour by the necessity of confirming his actions with the man against whom they are directed: the confrontation is almost a confession:

It would have been in consonance with the spirit of Captain Vere should he on this occasion have concealed nothing from the condemned one--should he indeed have frankly disclosed to him the part he himself had played in bringing about the decision, at the same time revealing his actuating motives. (L.286)

Seen from the psychological viewpoint, the narrative becomes double-edged in its function: it treads treacherously close to the disclosure, and the images are of confession, making public of the private, and hidden motivation. As the description progresses, it slides more into unconscious innuendo--"Even more may have been." (L.287)--and into highly-charged chiaroscuro language, centralizing the essential conflict: "Captain Vere may have developed the passion sometimes latent under an exterior stoical or indifferent. He was old enough to have been Billy's father." (L.287)

The iconic representation of the father-son motif has occurred earlier and is coupled, in this instance, with the Biblical image of Abraham and Isaac, and its attendant, and obvious, sacrificial and sacramental quality; so Vere, perhaps, "letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity, may have caught Billy to his heart . . ." (L.288) in a symbolic expression. However, it is temporary and ominous, for "the austere
devotee of military duty . . ." (L.287) pursues his plans as civilized man acting in an alienated and deracinated fashion. Vere is compelled to repress his instincts or be destroyed by them. The "paragraph of thin summarized conjecture," in Gettman and Harkness' phrase, concludes: "There is privacy at the time, inviolable to the survivor; and holy oblivion, the sequel to each diviner magnanimity, providentially covers all at last." It is to this holy oblivion that the work progresses and although, to this point, the timbre of nihilism can be detected in the individual characters and their actions, the underlying mood has hitherto remained covert; it is expressed here, appropriately with reference to religion and history—the pall of history simply engulfs all sucking them into the void; that is to say, the characters die fatalistic deaths and the re-emphasized inexplicable mystery of their actions is forged into literary myth. With the collapse of myth, nihilism is born, and myth, which once justified modes of power and repression canalized into religious transcendence, is no longer able to mystify authentic experience.

Vere's countenance on leaving Billy was "one expressive of the agony of the strong. . . ." (L.289) The paternal Vere is the tried and true authoritarian father who is hurting his son for the son's own good "the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation . . . ." (L.289) At the same time, it reveals something
of the narrator's attitudes toward Billy, for our sympathy tends to be engaged on Vere's behalf and drawn away from the cynosure, focused on the commander as he suffers by effecting his "duty." The interview between Vere and Budd, to which the narrator was not privy, encompasses less than an hour and a half, during which interval the curiosity of the ship's company is aroused. After "a summons under such circumstances not usual in those hours . . ." (L.292), Captain Vere, with an apologetic note for the pomp and circumstance by the narrator, "surrounded by all the wardroom officers, addressed his men . . ." (L.293), and "In so doing, his manner showed neither more nor less than that properly pertaining to his supreme position aboard his own ship." (L.293) Why it is necessary for the narrator to single out and apologize for this act of naval regalia, to which the captain qua captain has every right, becomes understandable, when we realize that the narrator is attempting to downplay Vere's self-aggrandizement; Vere's position is supreme, he is coming into his own in the role of God-like dispenser of justice. Furthermore, the inclusion of such detail along with the particulars of the precise manner in which the ritual is carried out, reinforces the propriety, the just-so quality, i.e., the compulsiveness, that is associated with the ship's Captain. During the address, again we have the allusion to the notion of secretiveness and of appearance and the reality lying behind it; "The word mutiny was not named in what he said," (L.294-- Melville's italics). Captain Vere,
refrained too from making the occasion an opportunity for any preachment as to the maintenance of discipline, thinking perhaps that under existing circumstances in the navy, the consequence of violating discipline should be made to speak for itself. (L.294)

Budd is made an example of, or to phrase it in keeping with the tenor of the story, he is taught a lesson, castigated, for his purported "revolt," a revolt, of the mutinous flesh.

The crew reacts to the announcement with "a confused murmur" (L.295), a parallel situation to the actual hanging and it is dealt with in a similar manner. To use the narrator's mot juste, it is "suppressed": "it was pierced and suppressed by shrill whistles . . . " (L.295) quelling any spontaneous response and signalling a resumption of routine. The crew's response to the news is "like that of a seated congregation of believers in Hell listening to the clergyman's announcement of his Calvinistic text." (L.294)

Elsewhere, the Calvinistic references are to the "natural depravity," considered to be "savoring of Calvinism," but without "Calvin's dogma as to total mankind." (L.131)

Certainly this reflects a moral system in Melville's recreation of myth out of Christian symbols. The evil of the "natural depravity" is linked to civilization and within that "austerer" context, it lurks in secrecy; the allied notions of evil and secrecy constitute a civilization that is, in itself, the expulsion from paradise, except that in
Melville's weltanschauung, there is really no paradise to be expelled from; everything is post-lapsarian, or from the standpoint of character, Billy is soiled in the world of Calvinistic authoritarianism where purity does not exist. Herman Melville's earlier position in White-Jacket to that in his old age, travels the route of Calvinistic pre-destination:

As a man-of-war that sails through the sea, so this earth that sails through the air. We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, never-sinking world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright; and she is but one craft in a Milky-Way fleet, of which God is the Lord High Admiral. The port we sail from is forever astern. And though far out of sight of land, for ages and ages we continue to sail with sealed orders, and our last destination remains a secret to ourselves and our officers; yet our final haven was predestined ere we slipped from the stocks at Creation. 4

The precision of ritual is noted in Claggart's burial: "every funeral honor properly belonging to his naval grade." (L.295) And in the following adherence to custom and form:

In this proceeding as in every public one growing out of the tragedy strict adherence to usage was observed. Nor in any point could it have been at all deviated from either with respect to Claggart or Billy Budd, without begetting undesirable speculations in the ship's company, sailors, and more particularly men-of-war's men, being of all men the greatest sticklers for usage. (L.296)

The concern with usage can be seen to be more a preoccupation with Vere and the narrator than with the crew. It is in the nature of a compulsive ritual which must be enacted in order to provide relief. The term tragedy is used to
designate the events: whether tragedy is used in the popular or classical sense is unspecified. Perhaps it is an event which goes beyond the borders of the human periphery and denotes the forces moving men to their limits. Karl Jaspers has written: "The tragic looms before us as an event that shows the terrifying aspects of existence, but an existence that is still human." It reveals its entanglement with the uncharted background of man's humanity, and Jaspers continues, "Paradoxically, however, when man faces the tragic, he liberates himself from it." Melville's despair prevents him from achieving liberation; perhaps, too, it is his view of humanity, predicated upon the dehumanized treatment of people in the microcosmic "seventy-four of the old order" (L.299) that keeps "the terrifying aspects of existence" at some remove and under control in the manner that the rational Vere's defense mechanisms operate by executing the irrational.

Jaspers also points out that,

Breakdown and failure reveal the true nature of things. In failure, life's reality is not lost; on the contrary, here it makes itself wholly and decisively felt. There is no tragedy without transcendence.

By these criteria, although there is an awareness of the tragic dimension on Melville's part, he fails to capture it in this work. The control asserted by the narrator and Vere serves the function of preventing insight and impeding the admission of failure and breakdown as well. There is no
illumination in the aesthetic dimension. Attributing the desire for usage to the crew, for example, is a remarkable indication of how patterns may be internalized and, when convenient or necessary, transferred. Moreover, even the hint of anything wrong, unwanted thought which the narrator euphemizes as "undesirable speculations," i.e., mutiny, causes elaborate precaution and dissimulation, so much so that it is ennunciated into a general rule of the high seas—"not to let the men so much as surmise that their officers anticipate aught amiss from them. . . ." (L.297) Finally, Billy is held incommunicado, "And certain unobtrusive measures were taken absolutely to insure this point." (L.298) Exactly what these measures are the reader is not told; the chaplain is the only one having access to him.

With Chapter 24 comes a slightly altered dimension in the narrative; there is a more developed sense of description articulating the subject matter of death. The reader meets Billy lying in an objectly passive posture in irons surrounded by a layer of phallic objects:

On the starboard side of the Bellipotent's upper gun deck, behold Billy Budd under sentry lying prone in irons in one of the bays formed by the regular spacing of the guns comprising the batteries on either side. All these pieces were of the heavier caliber of that period. (L.300)

The notion of Billy's entrapment is extended in the description of light patches "ineffectually struggling in obstructed flecks. . . ." (L.302) Both animate and inanimate are
rendered impotent. The narrator introduces some detail to elaborate the blackness of the surroundings and create the mood for the presentation that follows. The counterpoint of black and white, or light and darkness—the polarities of the thematic images of the novella—is sounded by the narrator in his elaboration: the guns' accoutrements "wore the like livery of the undertakers," (L.301) and "the funeral hue of these surroundings" (L.301), is contrasted with the "prone sailor's exterior apparel, white jumper and white duck trousers" (L.301), where the appearance, the external, serves as a metonym for the inner. The forces of death triumph over what the narrator and Vere project onto Billy,—the incarnate feminine principle. It is as if Billy were already dead, and in fact he is, not just from Vere's utterance, "Fated boy!," but as early as the initial introduction in the second chapter where his defect is linked to the "instance that the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden, still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of Earth." (L.48) This description exhibits the philosophical bias of Calvinistic fatalism and despair.

Philosophically for Melville, the characters are tainted, and civilization is an expression of the inherent evil. Billy is "soiled" in irons, "like a patch of discolored snow" (L.301) and the concept of tainted innocence permeates the description. His death is anticipated, in fact, it is
fait accompli: "In effect he is already in his shroud, or the garments that shall serve him in lieu of one." (L.301)
At this point he is shrouded in darkness, as it is night, and "over him but scarce illuminating him, two battle lanterns swing from two massive beams." (L.301) The light from the lamps "pollute the pale moonshine" (L.302); the lamps throw "flickering splashes of dirty yellow light." (L.302)
The remaining lanterns are compared to "small confessionals or side-chapels in a cathedral." (L.302)
Quite evidently there is a sickly affect here. Morbidity accompanies the necromantic element in the description of the prisoner: "But the skeleton in the cheekbone at the point of its angle was just beginning delicately to be defined under the warm-tinted skin." (L.303) The "rose-tan" has predictably disappeared as was anticipated in the earlier scene with Claggart, where "the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as by white leprosy." (L.222) Again the narrator introduces the recurrent image of the heart: "In fervid hearts self-contained, some brief experiences devour our human tissue as secret fire in a ship's hold consumes cotton in the bale." (L.303) The heart turned on itself, consuming itself, expresses the internalized consuming, self-destructive forces that forge a nexus for the characters' actions in the story. It is an internalized signification of the express violence of the story's movement, and repeats the image of seclusion in conjunction with the intensity (i.e.,
passion) of that area of the boat (i.e., body) that requires suppression.

Billy's suffering and entrapment are vocalized in the pinch of the "vice of fate," (L.303), a trope in which converges the physical and metaphysical; the guns serve as concrete embodiment, providing a rather nice double-entendre to the word "vice." The narrator refers to his agony as etiologically deriving "from a generous young heart's virgin experience of the diabolical incarnate and effective in some men--the tension of that agony was over now." (L.303) The sexuality is implicit. Billy has been deflowered and violated in both fact and phantasy; again, there is the intimation that Billy is already dead. Here the several imagistic strands of the work are drawn together: Billy as the epitome of heart, Claggart as the embodiment of evil expressed in religious terms, the juxtaposition of innocence and evil stage-managed by the narrator. The conclusion of the statement dealing with the origin of Billy's agony conveys an overwhelming sense of relief, relief from guilt, since the dangerous object has been removed, i.e., psychologically repressed by the narrator who transforms the phenomenon into the story's execution scene. Finding Billy guilty creates the outlet for the guilt and tension, and with the description, and in anticipation of the actual hanging, the narrator begins to move into sublime
characterizations of Billy at the cessation of his agony; his expression is "akin to the look of a slumbering child" (L.304), the central element of his innocence, "that adolescent expression" of Baby Budd. (L.304) The suggestion of childhood regression is allied to a look of near satisfaction on his part to be found in this situation: "For now and then in the gyved one's trance a serene happy light born of some wandering reminiscence of dream would diffuse itself over his face, and then wane away only to return." (L.304-5) The character is made an object of transcendence, and physical bondage is prerequisite to absolutely pure transcendence. Flesh becomes spirit, or more precisely, since Billy has been portrayed in consistently abstract terms from the beginning, spirit becomes purer through agony and violence; his happiness can only be sown on the soil of the grave.

This chapter contains three direct commentaries on the nature of war: the oil feeding the lamps is "supplied by the war contractors (whose gains, honest or otherwise, are in every land an anticipated portion of the harvest of death). . . . (L.301); the chaplain, an appendage of the death theme in his seeking "to impress the young barbarian with ideas of death akin to those conveyed in the skull, dial, and crossbones on old tombstones . . ." (L.309), is referred to as "the minister of Christ though receiving his stipend from Mars . . ." (L.305); and finally the concluding
sentences of the chapter treat the chaplain as an extension of his social framework—he has no choice in his mode of response, much like Captain Verc:

Bluntly put, a chaplain is the minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War—Mars. As such, he is as incongruous as a musket would be on the altar at Christmas. Why, then, is he there? Because he indirectly subserves the purpose attested by the cannon; because too he lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force. (L.312)

Even though this passage may be considered a critique of war, Melville's fascination with force and power is here evident as it is in other parts of the work. Brute force can be apotheosized as in the chapters on Nelson; religion can be made the subject of snide observation while at the same time it is used to suitably furnish the author with literary images; ironically, it provides a gloss on the author's unconscious Calvinism.

By means of the chaplain, the narrator elucidates further the nature of Billy's innocence and its expression in a civilized culture. Billy's lack of fear of death is connected to the idea that the irrationality underlying the fear of death is "more prevalent in highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand nearer to undulterate Nautre. And, as elsewhere said, a barbarian Billy radically was. . . ." (L.307) The nature of the comment would seem to carry some praise for barbarous communities and by extension Billy
himself, who serves as the focus for the conflict between reason and impulse; it is the barbaric, the impulsive which is dammed up by the process of the narration.

That Billy is electrically attractive is evident in the indirect analogue describing German captive barbarians in Rome who might have served as subjects for Fra Angelico's paintings because they "have the faint rosebud complexion of the more beautiful English girls." (L.309) This is the second analogue to paintings in the novella; it is also the second depiction of Billy in female terms, although the connection to Billy is circuitous, it contains the charged term "rose-bud", a word previously noted. In the same vein, there is the exceptional circumstance where the chaplain plays out his feelings, an act that the other principals may fear they want to commit, without ever actually wanting to, consciously. The chaplain, the narrator says, "in his emotion not without first performing an act strange enough in an Englishman . . . he kissed on the fair cheek his fellow man, a felon in martial law. . . ." (L.311)

Another reference to Billy's innocence is touched on when the narrator informs us that the chaplain could do nothing "to avert the doom of such a martyr to martial discipline." (L.312) At this point, the simplicity of essential innocence balanced against evil incarnate, becomes transparent. Billy, the reader has been informed, is flawed—he stutters; moreover, other flaws are evident, notably his inability to 'see,' 'to perceive.' On this leaf of the
MSS., Melville wrote: "an irruption of heretic thought hard to suppress . . ." a notation, interesting for a number of reasons. The diction is consistent with the psychological dynamic of the work; in the second place, the image recalls the political cliché, in which the Nore mutiny is likened, in physiological terms to "the distempering irruption of contagious fever . . ." (L.57), which, too paints revolt in terms of the body and advocates as a corollary that the situation be medically corrected. Having been variously interpreted by many critics, and the point of contention seems to be primarily its relation to the main text, the phrase make sense if considered in conjunction with "essential goodness." There is, in the work, an inverted Calvinism. The thought would be heretical vis-a-vis the book's Calvin-istic underlay, in that it negates the base, "soiled" quality, raising the speculation that perhaps in spite of the defective in Billy, he may have the requisite quality for transcendence. Yet the contempt for the worldly is sustained in the philosophy of despair in the work's tone and the contempt for the worldly is re-emphasized in that all the characters possess the taint of being-in-the-civilized-world. It would make an even more ponderous and guilt-laden assertion if Billy were really actually pure; his soiledness lends a flexible permissiveness to the actions directed against him.
"a long thin chain was round Melville's ankle all the time, binding him to American to civilization, to democracy, to the ideal world. It was a long chain: and it never broke. It pulled him back."

D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature.

'For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away.'

Swooning swim to less and less, Aspirant to nothingness! Sobs of the world, and dole of kinds That dumb endurers be— Nirvana! absorb us in your skies, Annul us into thee.

This section of the thesis examines the images that cluster around the final action of the narrative, the role of the narrator and the emergent philosophy of repression. The idea of sight is of particular importance, and the figure of the hold as a black hole recurs in Chapter 25. While the narrative works toward the conclusion, it traces the chained Billy, against the background of night moving to the dawning of a new day. The opening sentence of the chapter contrasts the light, "so luminous on the spar deck . . ." with the dark, "on the cavernous ones below . . ." (L.313) which are "so like the tiered galleries in a coal mine. . . ." (L.313) The images of light and dark, white and black, give way to a "shy light" with "a diaphanous fleece of white furrowed vapor," a vapour which Billy burns out with his death. As the light increases, the crew is summoned to watch the execution. Captain Vere is not only "the central figure among the assembled commissioned officers" (L.315), he is really the central figure of the tale, for it is his "tragedy," as the narrator terms it, that is being acted out; he is the pater omnipotens, the powerful God condemning his son Christ to die; he is Goya's grotesque Saturn devouring his son. Captain Vere is writing out his last will and testament, as Nelson did, before the battle, to demonstrate the grand gesture, to write history before it transpires, to attain absolution before the world for his guilt; this is the atonement of the guilty father for the punishment
he inflicts upon his son, an act for which he pathologically lacks the mechanism of control. At this level the story attempts to embody sacrament and myth, as Richard Chase has contended; more precisely, since the story cannot support the weight, it might be said that the tale wishfully attempts to contain the impulse within the myth. Historically, it reincarnates Nelson, psychologically, it exorcises massive guilt, with an accompanying repressed sexuality. In fact, it is difficult at times to ascertain the actual locus of the story, for although it is filtered through the narrator's controlling consciousness, often, it seems to be transpiring in Vere's mind, where compulsions and phantasies find expression in actions obsessed with grandeur and the sense of personal destiny.

Billy's impending execution is alluded to as a "consummation" (L.317) and the sexual implication is carried through by means of the discussion of the lack of spasm. Why the consummation is carried out on the mainyard, a fact frequently commented upon, would seem to carry no more significance than Melville's flexible treatment not only of history but of naval regulations. He is, in the end, an artist calling on a sphere of reference to create a story, not catalogue an event or naval code. The mainmast is a central point of the boat and its shape is cruciform, in keeping with the religious symbolism. Moreover, it is quite possible that Vere's motives for such a choice derive from
his unconscious; can it not be part of the ritualistic
compulsion of Vere's character?

Symbolically, Vere faces forward and Billy aft, (the
distance both physical and metaphysical between the ruler
of the ship of state and these ruled is galactic), as Billy
gives the "conventional felon's benediction directed aft
towards the quarters of honor. . . ." (L.317) The expos-
tution was "wholly unobstructed in the utterance," and
this lack of stutter is fitting since the flaw occurs only
under stress and Billy has no fear of death, i.e., he
embraces it as part of his role; secondly, the tension as
far as Billy is concerned is over; thirdly, it is not out
of keeping with his hermetic character, which also contains
that essential element of "mystery." Whether the remark,
"God bless Captain Vere!" (L.317) is ironic or not is a
contentious point. A primary consideration is whether the
context makes it ironic, or whether Billy is aware of its
intent.

It would be fruitless to argue that Billy is himself
aware of the remark's irony. The question becomes one of
whether the narrator has delineated a context that permits
an ironic explication. The benediction might be considered
ironic if we could accept a bitter remark issuing from Billy
or, that from Vere's viewpoint, he is acting out of really
altruistic, selfless motives. These ironic options, or
variants of them only offer a very superficial reading.
Furthermore to establish a definitive context would require
an absolutely authoritative text. What, however, can be demonstrated is how and why Vere's actions are precipitate, how they are ultimately dehumanizing and compulsive, rooted in guilt and irrationality, while at the same time, supporting an exterior that is a mask of calmness and rationality. On this basis the lines can be read ironically, for how in a godless universe can one even say, "God bless Captain Vere!"? This is the ultimate cosmic irony, and one in which, doubtless, Melville can have his private joke; while religion is employed for literary purposes and reviled, it functions as the catalyst of nihilism and despair, and with the benediction, a precise identification between father and son, violator and violated is made. Besides, if anyone is in need of a blessing, it is the Captain who is the most psychically damaged character in the novella.

It is not essential to assume that the narrator's comments serve necessarily to clarify; on the contrary the function, as it has been suggested, may be to obfuscate in some instances, what Harry Stack Sullivan has somewhere termed "selective inattention," while in others, the narrative cannot but be influenced by the individual perceptions of the narrator. The question then becomes to what extent the narrator ought to be trusted; for example, in describing the benediction to follow, Billy's utterance is compared to "syllables too delivered in the clear melody of a singing bird on the point of launching from the twig
Of course, there is the allusion to Billy's ability to sing, he is, after all, an emblem of harmony, but one wonders at the somewhat unkind pun, especially when the description continues and points out that it "had a phenomenal effect . . ." (L.318), a repetition of the earlier comment that Claggart was the only one capable of appreciating Billy. Here the discussion purports to be philosophical and as such is coherent, although it is essentially a diversionary tactic by the narrator.

Juxtaposed with the phenomenol is the noumenal. If a phenomenon is individual, constructed by a particular person's sense, with respect to Claggart's perception of Billy, it implies that it is the mode by which Claggart sees the foretopman that constitutes an aspect of his individual reality. The implications are manifold, inasmuch as this accounts for the solipsism in the story, that partitioning of thought and action by which the narrator attempts to isolate his characters and submerge their intentions. In addition, the Kantian divisions tend to undermine the universal abstractions which the narrator posits. This point is elaborated because the two realms of private and public establish part of the book's thematic structure and emerge again in the following description: "the phenomenol effect" was "not unenhanced by the rare personal beauty of the young sailor, spiritualized now through late experiences
so poignantly profound." (L.318) The flesh mortified before
the spirit becomes beautiful. As Billy approaches death,
his beauty is augmented. To him is attributed that trans-
cendent quality and that spirituality accorded him through
the work is now made absolute with his demise. Secondly,
the spiritualization perversely comes about as a result of
"late experiences so poignantly profound", yet the
reader knows that these experiences are profound only
inversely in their degradation: algolagnia is central to
the experience. Billy is victimized by Claggart, accused,
phantasized by Vere, tried, clapped into chains, mentally
afflicted by the minister, and then executed. These events
are considered to enhance the etherealized portrait of his
"rare personal beauty," an obsessively recurrent phrase of
the narrator's. This is also the second allusion to a "rare"
component in Billy; the other occurs in connection with Vere
and him closeted together, "sharing in the rarer qualities
of our nature . . ." and the narrator places the quality
beyond the reader's grasp.

The crew's response to Billy's expostulation is
"without volition," as "but the vehicles of some vocal current
electric. . . ." (L.318) The method of navy discipline
has shaped the reflexive nature of the crew. On the other
hand, the response of Edward Fairfax Vere is ambiguously
twofold: he is exhibiting either "stoic self-control or a
sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock . . ."
"L.319), the result of which is that he "stood erectly
rigid as a musket in the ship-armourer's rack." (L.319)
The figure of speech makes the appropriate equation with an implement of destruction, an inanimate, emotionless artifact. Up to this point, the whole world, encapsulated in the warship, has been symbolically verging on the anarchic, the chaotic, as it has been within the commander since the novella's inception. This feeling is captured in the notation that "the hull was . . . deliberately recovering from the periodic roll of leeward. . . ." (L.319) The description is surreal; here is Vere, either stoic or rigid, take your choice says the narrator, and incidentally he provides another counterfeit option, for the two responses are complementary—having determined his stand from the crew's echo, Vere is in reality holding himself back, experiencing as little as possible under the circumstances, and the two choices are merely a split of the basic protective defense mechanism. Vere is observing Billy about to die while the ship is quietly rolling from side to side. From the surreal to the apocalyptic is just a short psychic hop, for, as the signal is given, and it too, like much is in the work, is "a preconcerted dumb one,"

it chanced 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. (L.319-20)

The description sketches the counterpart to Christ; there
is the Biblical vision and the pseudo-religious ambience of the sentence. The inference is that by his death a purification can be achieved. In psychological terms, it fulfills the demands of guilt and repression. By his death, the rose in his cheek is transferred to the "rose of the dawn," although there is also the implication that with Billy's ascension, light has gone out of the world.\(^2\)

Narrating the execution by means of a quasi-mystical vision imbues it with some transcendent quality and depicting this incident in such a manner purposely obscures the brutality of the act. Glorifying the event makes it seem acceptable and the only possible alternative under the circumstances. The pomp and ceremony mystify experience.

The concluding lines of the chapter are reminiscent of the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, (where the focus is on the roll of the ship), and contrasted with it is the lack of spasm in Billy: "In the pinioned figure arrived at the yard-end, to the wonder of all no motion was apparent, none save that created by the slow roll of the hull in moderate weather, so majestic in a great ship ponderously cannoned." (L.320) In one sequence there is the failure of orgasm in Billy, the rolling of the microcosm and the emphasis on the potency of the phallicly defined "great ship ponderously cannoned." The power is transferred from the human and vested in the institution, the boat. The reader's attention is re-directed from Billy to the inanimate. Billy's
portrayal, from the narrator's point of view as a non-sexual being is symbolized by his failure of orgasm, but this is readily recognized as a kind of wish-fulfillment on the narrator's part; Billy is not so much non-sexual as objectified, and dehumanized, while simultaneously, he is elevated to the spiritual level. It may be asked, then, why the concern with such a bodily function? The concern discloses the unconscious interest by the narrator, and also divulges the Calvinism, by pointing out that the absence of the physical is indispensable for the spiritual, and reinforced by its lack. Even with Claggart, the narrator has essayed to raise the motives above the "mere passions," and bodily function.

From Billy hanging at the yard-end, the account leaps to two characters who have no part in the narrative, yet who disport verbally over the implications and consequences of the lack of muscular spasm in the victim. The narrative also leaps in time; there is a disjunction between "the slow roll of the hull" (L.320) and the dialogue which is "some days afterwards. . . ." (L.321) Following the colloquy between the purser and the surgeon, the narrative resumes "at the moment of execution. . . ." (L.325) One of the purposes of this interlude is to create a form of distancing, to remove the reader and narrator from the actual immediacy of the situation, to discuss it in highly clinical terms. The language of the two men is excessively drab and mechanical;
scientific abstraction tendentiously lends weight to the metaphysical. The purser's intelligence is undercut with the observation that he was "more accurate as accountant than profound as a philosopher"; in other words, he is unfit to speculate on the higher realms; on the other hand, in the course of the discussion, the surgeon is rendered ineffectual as well.

There is such a strong element of the bizarre in this section that one cannot help but wonder whether Melville is deriving some perverse sort of pleasure out of it, or whether he is having a laugh at the reader's expense, or both: the surgeon's reply to the purser's question about lack of spasm, which is phrased in 18th Century syntax, is prissy beyond belief and so is the explanation itself. There is a kind of reversal operating in the exchange: the purser who might be expected to follow a metaphysical view in the argument, and the doctor, a physical viewpoint, change positions; the purser first brings in the philosophical with the notion of will-power and the doctor counters. The purser then asks how the lack of spasm, which is "in a degree more or less invariable in these cases" (L.322) can be accounted for, whereupon the doctor denies any interest in the situation; nor can he account for it: "For me, I do not, with my present knowledge, pretend to account for it at all." (L.323) It remains delectably tantalizing whether the present knowledge refers to the area of
scientific facts, or to those of the trial. The remark is peculiar also for the reason that science is usually fascinated by any deviance from the norm, in point of fact, sees in the deviance an opportunity for some new development. Moreover, the doctor's tentative explanation alludes to the idea that there is "emotion" in Billy's heart, not a very scientific explanation, but nevertheless consistent with the narrator and Vere's view of Billy as the feminine principle, all heart, which has to be excluded from reasoned judgment.

The discussion shifts to a teasing exchange centering around the word "phenomenon." The occurrence of this word has been noted before. The purser questions whether the incident was phenomenal, following the doctor's use of the word, meaning that it was a particular event, an object of sense perception, something of which the senses take note. The surgeon replies that it is so "in the sense that it was an appearance the cause of which is not immediately to be assigned." (L.324) Now this is ambiguous. There are two usages present: the first is the obvious one, widespread in popular speech, i.e., the thing was fantastic, exceptional; the second usage, since the cause is unascertainable, would tend to displace the event into the realm of noumena, in the assigning of causes, to revert again to the Kantian schemata. Both categories make the cause elusive and unknowable, and at the same time the individual nature of
the perception relegates the interpretation to a subjective point of view, the event which is phenomenologically constructed by the percipient. And the key to this is the fact that it is constructed by its appearance, "an appearance the cause of which . . . " may ultimately be opposite to the reality, a major thematic consideration of the novella. The circularity of the discussion is essential to the function of the surgeon's discourse which is to confound further the lack of spasm in Billy, to place it in a region beyond speculation. What makes the situation even more paradoxical is the fact that it is usually the man of science who uses hard and cold scientific data to ascertain causes and arrive at an elucidation. Science cannot explain everything; neither can philosophy. And it is made quite clear that the questions which are raised philosophically lack profundity. The coherence that much criticism has found in the structure and ideas of the novel does not really exist; the story raises questions which are not consciously answered and to some extent which are consciously not answered. Certain of these questions might admit of answers, but they are to be found only in the latent psychology of the work.

The narrative moves from the quasi-Kantian philosophy to a Schopenhauerian consideration as to whether the death was "a species of euthanasia." (L.324) The doctor connects the concept of euthanasia to will-power and in a Melvillean
pun dismisses it as Greek. According to the editors' appendix, the notion of euthanasia was for Schopenhauer, equivalent to Nirvana, which is "the highest consummation of life,"\(^3\) According to Merton M. Sealts, Jr.'s *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed*,\(^4\) Melville in his later years, notably during the composition of *Billy Budd, Sailor*, was immersed in the works of Schopenhauer.

The concept of free will is ostensibly germane to the activity of the book, where in a general sense all actions subserve Vere's purposes which in turn are subject to the needs of the author and his "second self." The absence of free will begins with Billy's impressment, where the decision for the action is relegated to someone else, and being so relegated, raises the question of ultimate responsibility for autonomy, for who can be free when Captain Vere heads the ship of state? On the other hand, the notion of free will may simply be a pseudo-problem the book entertains, for literary purposes and for camouflage.

Melville returns to the scene of the execution having the narrator note the "emphasized silence" contiguous with "a sound not easily to be verbally rendered." (L.325) This characteristically Melvillean method of writing manifest in the work finds expression in the narrator's difficulty in relating the whole story--from attempting to capture the portrait of Claggart to describing a sound. Melville frequently employs a description of nature to parallel the
human response and when the murmur of the men is related to the advent of a tropical shower, the reader notes the assuredly Biblical tone, the voice from the whirlwind, rising to a crescendo in the sound emitted by the men. The narrator is equivocal, stating that the murmur was "possibly implying a sullen revocation on the men's part of their involuntary echoing of Billy's benediction." (L.327) Noteworthy in the description is the lack of will power. Since the narrator mentions no other alternative for the sound, it can be assumed that they were, in reality, reacting against the hanging: this assumption can be further tested by the explanation of the events that ensue, which are in turn designed to transform genuine human response into meaningless pattern. The murmur is met "by a strategic command (L.327); the whistles pipe everyone into shrill harmony, and this scene resembles Claggart's funeral where "a confused murmur" arose at the end to be "pierced and suppressed by shrill whistles of the boatswain and his mates." (L.295) Meaningful human response is severed, particularly when that response begins to penetrate the regimen, when men's actions return to the human level from their machinelike conditioning. The crew is forced to yield "to the mechanism of discipline" (L.327) and the reader can rest assured in the false consciousness which promises him that things are well and all is back to normal. The crew is inured to instinct, having been returned to a postnatal womb where the structure provides the security of
uterine existence.

The burial elicits "a second strange human murmur" (L.329) and the contour of the human universe alone cannot contain the implication of the cry, for it is embedded in the description "with another inarticulate sound proceeding from certain larger sea fowl" (L.329), who move to the foam created by the ballasted hammock, (again the resemblance to the conclusion of Moby-Dick); the seafowl sing Billy's requiem; the crew of the ship wants to sing it, not, however, in traditional choral form, but in the notes of rebellion. The narrator explains the upsurge of the men with reference to their superstitious beliefs. But in view of the book's preoccupation with mutiny, the responses of the ship's commander, those historical commanders whom the narrator invokes, and perhaps also bearing in mind D. H. Lawrence's dictum that it is the tale and not the teller that must be trusted, the "uncertain movement" of the crew "in which some encroachment was made" (L.331), can be nothing other than the genesis of revolt; it is headed off by the drum beat, a sound so profoundly internalized, that, as is so perceptively pointed out, it has converted impulse into instinct: "True martial discipline long continued super-induces in average man a sort of impulse whose operation at the official word of command much resembles in its promptitude the effect of an instinct." (L.331) This description makes evident enough the repressed and internalized behaviour of the men.
When impulse is transmuted into mechanism, and it is a word the narrator employs on more than one occasion in reference to discipline, the quality of life becomes contained by the form that is externally considered to be decorous. In Captain Vere's instance, it is his vision of a self-fulfilling prophecy that is being worked out; the prophecy is met with resistance by the crew, the unruly mob, located in the black underside, the bowels, of the ship; libido is de-cathected and dispersed in the regimentation, "the forms" in Vere's phrase, of daily life. Yet the fact that the energy is libidinal is sufficiently distressing that it has to be quelled at the first signs of emergence; it has to be dissipated, "dissolved" is the word the narrator uses--"The drumbeat dissolved the multitude. . . ."

(L.332) The rumblings of the crew and the subsequent escape into structure make all too transparent the narrator's awareness of the importance of the ritual: should they not be subjected to orders, mutiny would result, and mutiny is the antichrist of this testament, a mutiny of the ship, of culture, and more especially of the sexual component of the psyche, which at all costs must be contained. In this way, **Billy Budd, Sailor**, is a parable of sexuality, a kind of psycho-drama wherein the narrator's soul is unconsciously laid bare through a phantasy, triple-split into different characters. Vere acts out his phantasy by giving flesh to
his words. He sees his utterances embodied in Billy hanging before his eyes, words concretized. The narrator's awareness of and emphasis on "the mechanism of discipline,"cannot be overstressed; there is constant repetition which builds to the military splendour and ceremony exhibited in the delivery of the "summed report." (L.332) It is pointed out that this is at "variance from usage" (L.333), being in advance of the customary time. Authorization for this comes from Captain Vere, and it is during this explication that reference to him as a martinet is drawn: it is a psychological commonplace that destructive attitudes result from a threat to self-integration and preservation, and frustration of libidinal urges, or sexual urges which involve aggressive attitudes; in this light, Vere's motives become apparent and the following reference Robert Waelder makes to an unpublished article by Anna Freud, entitled Ein Beitrag zur Pädagogenanalyse, offers supplementary insight:

Anna Freud called attention to a class of martinets, sometimes encountered among educators, who are intolerant of any sign of independence in the children under their care, or are thrown into panic by it. This disciplinary rigidity was seen as an outgrowth of childhood experiences of anxiety and terror at the occurrence of erections independently of one's will and not responsive to efforts at controlling them. 5

Vere displays signs of both panic and intolerance, in fact, the narrator uses the word intolerant to describe his attitude to infractions of discipline. The connection with sexuality is apposite, for it is sexual anxiety that lies
at the root of the work's behavioural pattern. There is, also, the consideration of Vere's rigidity. Following the reference to the martinet, comes the well-known lines issuing from Vere:

"With mankind," he would say, "forms measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood."

(L.333)
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION:

THE MELODY OF DEATH

"Behind all music one ought to try and catch that noiseless tune that’s made for us, the melody of death."

Louis-Ferdinand Céline, 
Journey to the End of the Night.
The repressive thinking of Captain Vere culminates in the "forms, measured forms" which seek to turn the content into the container; just as Orpheus mystifies and bewilders, Vere turns thought into automaton-action, preventing the crew from insight and response, while blocking his own channels of self-perception. Form assuages anxiety. Orpheus, emblem of civilizing forces, of the Appolonian, recruits the "wild denizens," the Dyonisiac, into the forces of order which lie beyond the heart's pale. And with another allusion to rebellion, in this instance the French Revolution, Captain Vere, in a manner most typical, directs his comment "to the disruption of forms going on across the Channel" (L.333); for him, the actions are always, 'out there,' objectified.

Objectification serves the purpose of distancing, but its long range consequence is to produce in Vere the sense that he is the creator of his environment; he has already originated the phantasy of the order of things within his own mind, i.e., he plays god in his self-created universe. He is one of those aggressive individuals "who seek to express similar aggressive impulses by becoming themselves the controllers or the conscience-keepers of society, and moulding it to their own pattern."¹ A corollary to Vere's compulsion to forms is the compulsion to repeat, the Freudian notion of the repetition compulsion which is tied to the death instinct:
The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat (which we have described as occurring in the early activities of infantile mental life as well as among the events of psychoanalytic treatment) exhibit to a high degree an instinctual character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some 'daemonic' force at work. In the case of children's play we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively. Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of. 2

The early chapters on the Nore mutiny and Nelson, serve as a preface to the theme of revolt and suppression, but their underlying function in relation to Vere's phantasy can be seen more clearly at this juncture of the tale. With the introduction of details concerning "the Great Mutiny," the theme of secrecy is sustained in the notation that it is the tendency of history to downplay the catastrophic. Interestingly, the analogy is to the family, and well suits the familial treatment of the Budd-Vere relationship:

If a well-constituted individual refrains from blazoning aught amiss or calamitous in his family, a nation in the like circumstance may without reproach be equally discreet. (L.54)

The discussion of the Nore mutiny is inflated to enormous proportions: were the fleet to collapse, so would the Empire. To assault the status quo of the Bellipotent would be to cause it to flounder or to carry the analogy further, were repressed elements to gain ascendency, a mental unbalance would follow. The extreme diction makes one call
into question the validity of the position: the language of the following passage is, to understate it in the extreme, figuratively inflammatory:

the bluejackets . . . ran up with huzzas the British colors with the union and cross wiped out; by that cancellation transmuting the flag of founded law and freedom defined, into the enemy's red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt. Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames. (L.52-53)

Another analogy is introduced, this time a physiological one, where the mutiny is compared to a "distempering irruption of contagious fever in a frame constitutionally sound, and which anon throws it off." (L.157) The analogy can only confuse; a mutiny is caused by individuals and is consciously suppressed by others in power. Society is not a self-correcting system in the manner of the human body. The fact that a mutiny is equated with a fever implies a pre-judgment about the mutiny: that it is not only undesirable, but evil and unhealthy. Such a view belies Melville's earlier ones in White-Jacket, and is discontinuous with the observation that where there were grievances they should be redressed. The narrator comments that "the outbreak at the Nore was put down," (L.68) and although things were not changed, the narrator observes that things, however, must go on, the status quo must be preserved as he refers to the fleet as "indispensable." (L.69) War must continue, and so must impressment in "a fleet the more insatiate in demand for
men." (L.69) In a strikingly twentieth-century image, Melville depicts the ship swallowing up men in the noble endeavour of shoring up "against contingencies present and to come" (L.69), and everything is "worked by muscle alone," that descent to brute force which insures a kind of security against the hell located in impermanence and change whose very presence justifies the necessity of power. In the argument which vacillates from paragraph to paragraph, the narrator apologizes for coercion and attempts to cushion the reality, but his language is a betrayal; Nelson can win his men over; there is no need "to terrorize the crew into base subjection, but . . . by force of his mere presence and heroic personality . . ." (L.72), he can prevail. Balanced against this is the observation concluding the historical digression, that on many ships "the lieutenants assigned to batteries felt it incumbent on them . . . to stand with drawn swords behind the men working the guns." (L.72) In a somewhat contradictory manner, the following chapter begins with the observation that the Bellipotent evinces nothing of the disharmony of the recent past, prompting the reader to question the inclusion of all the material.

Clearly the figure of Nelson is magnetic for the narrator, and provides the scenario for Captain Vere's phantasy. The digression on Nelson is more of an apology and deification than anything else. It apologizes for his
"ornate publication of his person in battle (L.62), that is, his decision to avoid bringing the fleet to anchor in the face of a devastating onslaught. The reader is told that "Nelson on the brink of opening the fight sat down and wrote his last brief will and testament," (L.66) an act most curious, upon which the narrator makes no pronouncement. It is an act purportedly *ad maiorem gloriam* of king and country, but in fact, it masks a sublime egotism. It also masks the inner void of Captain Vere, who, through Nelson seeks a real self; Nelson offers an historical sense, a semblance of perpetuity transcending the present.

The portrait of Nelson evinces the sacramental tone evident in other areas of the work; the religious tone is layered with a sentimentalism; Nelson is portrayed as offering himself up "for the altar and the sacrifice":

If under the presentiment of the most magnificent of all victories to be crowned by his own glorious death, a sort of priestly motive led him to dress his person in the jewelled vouchers of his own shining deeds; if thus to have adorned himself for the altar and the sacrifice were indeed vainglory, then affectation and fustian is each more heroic line in the great epics and dramas since in such lines the poet but embodies in verse those exaltations of sentiment that a nature like Nelson, the opportunity being given, vitalizes into acts. (L.66-67)

There is a great deal of sick affect here and no detachment on the narrator's part. The tone of hysteria is coupled with a chiliastic view of the poet's office, which finds outlet in the narrator's embodiment in his tale of restrained primal impulses. The sentimentalism is pathological because
it exalts this kind of insane behaviour, and condones it as valourous, admirable and of the sort we ought to imitate.

This same passage is framed by the remark that, "Personal prudence, even when dictated by quite other than selfish consideration, surely is no special virtue in a military man; while an excessive love of glory impassioning a less burning impulse, the honest sense of duty, is the first." (L.66) If a person has no concern for himself, indeed, is careless about his person in the manner of Nelson, how can he possibly have concern for those around him? All the more reason to examine the kind of power structures that place the uncaring individual in positions where he can dispense human lives, especially where power, as in the case of Vere, is a substitute for anything that might include the sexual. The passage, too, has affinities with the description of Billy as a jewelled priestess, and the whole section serves to act, in the narrator's own phrase, as "a trumpet to the blood. . . ." (L.65) It has affinities with the larger ritualistic elements in the work, for example, the importance of ceremonial is spelled out when the minister is employed to enact "the customary morning service." (L.334) The ritualism relieves the needs of the militaristic Captain Vere and the control is sustained:
the drum beat the retreat; and toned by music and religious rites subserving the discipline and purposes of war, the men in their wonted orderly manner dispersed to the places allotted them when not at the guns. (L.334)

The emphasis on pattern and order, and the authoritarian rhetoric are all extension of the notion of form to which the commander adheres. In this connection, there are a number of assumptions that may be made apropos the narrator: that he is speaking of the "forms" ironically, and with awareness; that he has identified so strongly with Vere, that the split no longer obtains and he has merged with the Captain to become him; or finally, his observations are made in presumably neutral conditions, a proposition insurmountably difficult to maintain since perception as pure act is a false hope. Of the alternatives, the most convincing is that the narrator is swept away into the course of events and even when he is attempting objectivity, i.e., those moments in which he might be said to exercise some form of critical attitude toward the characters, his fascination with the machinations of power remains. The ritual allures him and he extols its merits whether it be with reference to the execution or to singing the praises of Nelson. To that extent the narrator qua narrator, and through his characters, can do nothing other than act out his own compulsion. The mobility of the shifting narrator exists by virtue of the fact that he is a fragmented ego, an amalgam of character.

As in the conclusion of many other chapters, a
note of serenity enters at the termination. There is a return to mysticism at the close of Chapter 27, and the depiction is the first indication for some time that purity is once more restored after being vitiated by the "greasy soup":

And now it was full day. The fleece of low-hanging vapor had vanished, licked up by the sun that late had so glorified it. And the circumambient air in the clearness of its serenity was like smooth white marble in the polished block not yet removed from the marble-dealer's yard. (L.334)

The sun shines through with clearness, but it is not without the usual Melvillean ambiguity in the comparison with marble, (an image recalling the great white brow of the whale), and representing something impenetrable to the cognate sense because of its blankness, its tabula rasa virginal quality.

The chapter ends, and this really seems to be the conclusion of the work, suggesting the great mystery of life. And surely life is mysterious, but the dynamic of a work such as this, a work by Melville's own admission incorporating "ragged edges," needs to be investigated carefully; the narrator remarks that they easily occur "in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact." (L.335) But the reader knows that the narration is just that, a story, and must ask why "such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial." (L.335) The "ragged edges" are the unknown moral truth lurking around the corner, a truth which cannot be wholly
anaesthetized although it is forcefully restrained. It raises the question, also, as to why Melville never finished a final version of the work, what the author himself referred to as "certain matters . . . which indeed may never be completed." The incompleteness of the story from the narrator's "ragged edges" to the ragged aesthetic edges, to the incomplete state of the manuscript exist because of the tale's internal fragmentation. The ambiguities extant in the story are not similar to those elements born out of the artist's unconscious and transformed into the multiplicity that is present in all great art, rather, the elusive qualities that prevent one from pronouncing judgment on Billy Budd, Sailor, are the ambiguities arising out of Melville's unresolved attitudes and conflicts. The narrator is apologetic about the "ragged edges" and during the course of the narrative, those which are readily obvious to the reader seemed contrived, while those earmarked by authenticity are placed in shadow. The narrator draws the reader's awareness away from those edges which offer the most meaningful insight into the story, and Melville is unconsciously neutralizing the effect. The ambiguity and multiplicity of view in the novella, as a work of art, can only be concurred upon if the données of the tale are accepted at face value, in other words, if the reader believes the narrator, as R. W. B. Lewis does, when he writes: "The entire story moves firmly in the direction of a transcendent cheerfulness: transcendent
and so neither bumptious nor noisy: a serene and radiant gladness." The tale may then be discussed in the traditional framework of great literature with the following conclusion:

So we are shown one kind of greatness of spirit in Vere, the soldier priest of the military necessity, joining with another kind in Billy Budd, whose power to bless transfigures not only his own life. 5

Questioning the narrator brings a new perspective; it is this perspective which has been followed in the thesis and what emerges is an underlying dynamic disclosing the unconscious motivation of the characters' acts.

The conclusion with its three curious short chapters has the ostensible function of tidying up the loose ends, but also providing that conscious ambiguity the author felt necessary to a work of art. Captain Vere, with forced symbolism, is wounded in a battle between two portentously named ships; and his deified presence is replaced by a senior lieutenant. Vere is cut down before the greatest battles, and the narrator suggests that his ambition was never fulfilled, that it "never attained to the fullness of fame" (L.338), perhaps like Melville himself. Captain Vere did attain, to some extent, a partial measure in usurping the most powerful position of executioner of Billy and controller of human lives. Suggested here is the fact that it was his dream to become Nelson, but this was achieved only in terms of phantasy. The fascination Captain Vere displays with how history will accord him his due reflects
his own emptiness, and desire for fame; Erich Fromm observes: "If the meaning of life has become doubtful, if one's relations to others and to oneself do not offer security, then fame is one means to silence one's doubts." Vere's death occurs under the power of a "magical drug" (L.339), and the recurrent notion of secrecy and subtlety is reiterated, for it is during the drug's influence which "mysteriously operates on the subtler element in man" (L.339), that the Captain gives voice to the foretopman's name. It remains uncertain why he calls out, according to the narrator who states that "these were not the accents of remorse" (L.339), but fails to identify what they were. If they are not, why should he utter them? This is another fine instance of Melville's inclusion of diversionary material, since there is no other reason for the outcry than guilt, both for the passion and for the denial, the thought of which having remained with him during the interval and finding final expression at that moment. The narrator notes that it is not remorse "would seem clear . . .", but does not say to whom, and further suggests that "the Bellipotent's senior officer of marines, who, as the most reluctant to condemn of the members of the drumhead court, too well knew, though here he kept the knowledge to himself, who Billy Budd was." (L.339); the observation summarizes the essential conflict between public and private, recondite and known, which is elaborated further in the account of the incident which
"appeared in a naval chronicle of the time, an authorized weekly publication . . ." (L.340) and demonstrates an uncanny awareness of the importance of ideology.

Although the narrator indicates that some change is to be expected in the communication of news, the dispatch itself makes quite plain the fact that the distortion is not simply the result of transmission, but that the details must be re-written in an 'English' way. What emerges from this account is the one-dimensionality of both the execution, and militarism in general, in which the chronicles act as apologizers and vindicators of those members of the agencies from which the organs are issued. In the face of these details, the narrator assumes the tired stance of Schopenhauerian resignation:

That which bestows on everything tragic its peculiar elevating force is the discovery that the world, that life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is not worthy of our affection; this constitutes the tragic spirit--it leads to resignation. 7

And this resignation is another feature of authoritarianism:

"Not to change fate, but to submit to it, is the heroism of the authoritarian character."8

Another function of the account in the chronicle is the reversal of good and evil in global terms. Black and white are inverted; and no one can tell who is to blame. This is particularly significant since, in a sense, all three characters are guilty. They are all agents of the narrator,
true, but in terms of individuated characters, they are all complicitous in the activities. Billy, for example, is an apologist for his life style as a master of the art of acquiescence; his innocence diminishes the authenticity of human nature. To accept him as emblem, as Melville's narrator would have the reader do, would be to revert back to the demands placed on the reader by the story's premiss that innocence is virtue, that "evil is labelled and personified..." As a final note of interest, the chronicle refers to Billy's purported crime as one of "extreme depravity" extending the inversion of good and evil, and drawing on the identical lexicon that was applied earlier to the master-at-arms.

The story concludes with the beginning, the ballad begun in 1885, which provided Melville with the source of the story and ironically, the point of departure is the point of arrival, and the mythic treatment accorded Billy in the poem, the narrator has sought to maintain throughout the narration. The greater dimensions of the characters in the story have been emphasized. The rarefied quality of Billy and the events surrounding his death are reified in the religious parallel with the Cross and the crew's feelings toward it: "To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross," (L.345) and the crew, the reader learns, were ignorant . . . of the secret facts of the tragedy" (L.345); at this point it may be said without exaggeration or
humourous intention, that really no one is, after the sundry admonishments of the narrator, aware of all the facts or their import, as he has tried to convince us throughout. It is, however, important to realize the accuracy of the crew's feelings--they have been made to feel the inevitability of the penalty, in accordance with the dictates of the narrator's "superego," but at the same time, "they instinctively felt that Billy was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of wilful murder." (L.346) Throughout the passage there is the familiar reference to mystery and a further allusion to Billy's departure--"he was gone, and in a measure mysteriously gone." (L.346) The crew estimate that his nature possessed an "unconscious simplicity" which "eventually found rude utterance" in the ballad. The tone of the poem is stylistically out of keeping with the narrative as a whole, yet still treats him as demi-god and hero, albeit now, admittedly more of a folk hero than one of classic legend.

The ballad has a kind of irony--Billy puns on his death and the poem contrasts the attitude of an 'average' seaman's to the aristocratic Billy's. And can we really imagine Billy giving a gift to a lady named Bristol Molly? The sentimental tone found throughout the book in conjunction with the theme of perception is apparent again in the line--"A blur's in my eyes." (L.349) Finally, there is the reference to imprisonment--Billy is held in earthly chains
in the darbies and the poem indicates he is to be held in chains for eternity after his death—"The oozy weeds about me twist." (L.351) The poem considers the states of waking and sleeping, existence and transcendence, underscored with the allusion to ambivalent realities—"it is dreaming that I am." (L.349)
EPILOGUE

That *Billy Budd, Sailor* answers some of the exigencies of Herman Melville's personal life has been suggested by diverse critics: Kingsley Widmer feels that, "the undeniable ambiguities of *Billy Budd* could be related to the deepest personal guilt and rationalization of the author."¹ William Braswell sees the book as the mode in which the author "resolved his own greatest personal crisis,"² and William York Tindall sees "the center of . . . the tale as the teller of the story or Melville himself."³ Born into a family where he "inherited the Reformation dogma of John Calvin, in a quite undiluted form,"⁴ Melville's sense of tragic despair deepened over the years; as Lawrance Thompson observes, "his own disillusionment forced him into such a private preoccupation with, and employment of, ambiguities and equivocations that he did not need to contrive any principles or practices of artistic subterfuge."⁵ The author's later concern with Schopenhauer is evident; he acquired seven volumes and they are heavily annotated. William Braswell concludes, "The kinship of Melville to this pessimist is indicated by many of the marked passages."⁶ To the Calvinistic Melville, the following marked passage from Schopenhauer's *Studies in Pessimism*, must have appealed:

> There is nothing more certain than the general truth that it is the grievous sin of the world which has produced the grievous suffering of the world. I am not referring here to the physical
connection between these two things lying in the realm of experience; my meaning is metaphysical. Accordingly, the sole thing that reconciles me to the Old Testament is the story of the Fall. In my eyes, it is the only metaphysical truth in that book, even though it appears in the form of an allegory. There seems to me no better explanation of our existence than that it is the result of some false step, some sin of which we are paying the penalty. 

The pervasive sense of nihilism in Melville has its roots not only in a singular life, and Schopenhauerian thinking which shows "the desirability of nonbeing as 'the most important of all truths'" but in the author's era, for the second half of the nineteenth century could no longer sustain the optimism of the Transcendentalists. In confronting his country and the experience of life it offered, he came to a realization of a vacuum existing at the core:

Melville understood the idea of the new; he understood that the discovery of the final New World ended, rather than began, man's eternal dream of a happy land where sorrow and pain would be no more. He knew that the New World, because it was the last, would necessarily be the place where men would have to face themselves without the comfort of that ancient faith that elsewhere life could be better. America meant that there was no place left to go, no more escapes, no more freedom growing in virgin lands. The gift of new space was finished, and henceforth men would have to make instead of receive their felicity. Melville knew that they would fail.

From the empty core emerges a violence displayed in his final work. Melville went beyond de Tocqueville's prediction that American "literature . . . has a penchant for the extreme and the violent in metaphysical stance as well as in narrative action." The aim of violence is to create a "crisis of
legitimacy" which evokes violence from others. This, Herman Melville admirably succeeded in doing, while simultaneously transforming the experience into apocalypse.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., eds., Billy Budd, Sailor: (An Inside Narrative) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). All references are to this edition of the work; the references, which are included in the text of the thesis, are to Leaf numbers, rather than pages.


15 Hayford and Sealts, *Introduction to Billy Budd, Sailor,* p. 3.


18. Ibid., p. 796.


23. Rathbun, p. 249.

24. Ibid.


27. Ibid.


It is almost superfluous to cite Leslie Fiedler's well-known interpretations of the themes of American literature, particularly those remarks on homosexuality in his equally famous volume:

The failure of the American fictionist to deal with adult heterosexual love and his consequent obsession with death, incest and innocent homosexuality are not merely matters of historical interest or literary relevance. They affect the lives we lead from day to day and influence the writers in whom the consciousness of our plight is given clarity and form. pp. 12-13.

And again:

... even if our dreams have become more frankly erotic, the American eros has not really changed. We continue to dream the female dead, and ourselves in the arms of our dusky male lovers." p. 29. Love and Death in the American Novel, Rev. ed., (New York: Stein and Day, 1966).


Raymond M. Weaver's comments serve as an example of those critics who have turned the negation of the work into an affirmation. He is quoted in Stafford, Melville's Billy Budd and the Critics, p. 134.

Paul Brodkorb, Jr., "The Definitive Billy Budd: 'But Aren't It All Sham?"' p. 603.

CHAPTER I


1 In a sense Melville can be said to anticipate a certain variety of 'pulp' literature of the 20th Century that plays on a craving for secrets:

The popular demand for 'inside' stories, for vicarious sharing of the private lives of 'personalities' rests on the craving for private life--even someone else's--of those who are dimly aware of having none whatever, or at least no life that holds their interest. The attempts to allay boredom are as assiduous as they are unavailing.

Ernest van den Haag,


2 *White-Jacket*, p. 15.


CHAPTER II

The quotations on the chapter title page occur on pages 187 and 208 respectively.

1White-Jacket, p. 374.

2Marcus Cunliffe makes reference to the general tone of masochism in Billy Budd, Sailor but makes no specific remarks about its connection or function. The Literature of the United States (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 127.


5Sandor Ferenczi, Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique of Psycho-Analysis (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), p. 251. Wilhelm Reich in his The Function of the Orgasm (New York: Bantam Books, 1967) maintains that sexual inhibition usually is manifested in "the throat and the anus." (p. 228, Reich's italics) and he details two cases where throat strictures and sexual suppression are linked,(pp. 41 and 233). Curiously,in the second instance, the patient's phantasies were connected to being hanged for what he considered to be sexual transgressions.
The Dansker, and hovering in the background, Melville himself, would seem to exemplify the kind of sentimentalism, Ernest G. Schachtel writes of in the following passage:

The possessive attitude to one's own past particularly to past feelings, more often imagined than real, seems to me the essence of sentimentality. The person who has this attitude pats himself on the shoulder, as it were and feels what a fine fellow he is for having had such feelings or such experience.


White-Jacket, p. 21.


White-Jacket, p. 185.

Ibid., p. 25.

Ibid., p. 185.

CHAPTER III

The epigraph is found on p. 423 of *Moby-Dick* (New York: Random House, 1950).

1 *White-Jacket*, p. 304.


5 Alex Comfort, *Art and Social Responsibility: Lectures on the Ideology of Romanticism* (London: Falcon Press, 1946), p. 50. (Author's italics.) William York Tindall is an example of a 'formist' critic, one for whom the values of the work are contained within its aestheticism; Tindall goes so far as to turn the incompleteness of the novella into form: "Disorder is a form for this and the apparently formless book a formal triumph." "The Form of *Billy Budd*," in Stafford, pp. 191-192.

Frederick Crews has commented on this phenomenon:

Not justice and passion, but order and sophistication are implicitly treasured. The critic's relation to his text is manipulative rather than involved. Instead of accepting and examining the temperamental affinity that led him to treat a certain author, he displays his capacity to perform correct and efficient operations that will give him total possession of the work. Writers who may have been scarcely able to contain their sensuality or savage indignation are thus transmuted into masters of cunning who have subliminally engineered our responses. Their seeming disunities are secret unities after all--indeed, are devices to trip us up.

CHAPTER IV


1The metaphor also has reference to the "cat's paw" description.

2This phonetic pronunciation is given in the O.E.D.

3The Source is Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary.

CHAPTER V


Milton R. Stern explains in what sense he feels the tragic can be applied to Melville:

I think that Melville's vision is not tragic in a classic sense, but rather in the pained discovery that the end of life is not a divinely ordained grand entry into the ultimate American name. Modern as it is, Melville's vision tends toward the naturalistic and the existential in its sense of death, or the consciousness thereof, as a basis for value. What Melville, as American writer, was confronted with was not so much the definition of tragedy as his tragic sense of mortal limitation; he knew the modern need to come to terms with the circular westward flight from history . . . . (p. 41, Stern's italics)


Karl Jaspers, Tragedy is Not Enough, p. 41.

Ibid., (author's italics).

Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 409.

CHAPTER VI


The next moment, the waning light expired, and with it the waning flames of the horned altar, and the waning halo around the robed man's brow; while in the darkness which ensued, the cosmopolitan kindly led the old man away.

3 p. 193.


CHAPTER VII


4 _The American Adam_, p. 149.


8 Fromm, p. 172.


EPILOGUE


2 William Braswell, "Melville's _Billy Budd_ as 'An Inside Narrative,'" in Stafford, p. 158.


5. Ibid., p. 423.


7. Thompson, pp. 350-351. (His italics).


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