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TECHNOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, AND POLITICAL VIRTUE:
THE CASE OF *BILLY BUDD*, SAILOR *

THOMAS J. SCORZA

Billy Budd, Sailor is an emphatically *political* novel. Even a cursory reading of the "Inside Narrative" reveals such an array of political themes that one is tempted to conclude that Melville intended his last work to be a comprehensive poetic introduction to political science. In effect, the author presents characters and events which compel the reader to reflect upon a wide variety of the fundamental problems in political science and political philosophy; among the problems thus raised are the following: the contrasts between the natural and the conventional, and between the demands of justice and the limits of law; the conflicts between authority and egalitarianism, and between conservatism and revolution; the contest between religious politics and secular ideology; and the question of the prerogatives and limitations of statesmanship. In light of the variety of political themes in the novel, it is not surprising that much of the criticism of *Billy Budd* has also tended to concentrate on political questions. Indeed, the two most prominent camps of criticism divide along political lines and form on opposite sides of the issues raised by the novel's political themes. One camp argues that *Billy Budd* is Melville's final conservative "testament of acceptance" of convention, law, authority, and Christianity, while the other sees the novel as Melville's final revolutionary "testament of resistance" to evil in the name of nature, justice, equality, and the Rights of Man.¹ In both camps, *Billy Budd* is a victim, but while one

* An earlier version of this paper was presented on November 1, 1973, to the Chicago chapter of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought. The author wishes to thank Professor James L. Wisner of Loyola University of Chicago for making the necessary arrangements for that presentation.

¹ For the development, elaboration, and later defense of the "testament of acceptance" interpretation, see the following: John Middleton Murry, "Herman Melville's Silence," *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 1173 (July 10, 1924), p. 433; Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), pp. 353-57; E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," *New England Quarterly*, VI (1933), pp. 319-27; F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 500-514; Charles Weir, Jr., "Malice Reconciled: A Note on Melville's *Billy Budd*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XIII (1944), pp. 276-85; William Ellery Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1944), pp. 231-49; Wendell Glick, "Expediency and Absolute Morality in *Billy Budd*," *PMLA*, LXVIII (1953), pp. 103-10; Richard Harter Fogle, "*Billy Budd*: The Order of the Fall," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XV (1960), pp. 189-205; Edward H. Rosenberry, "The Problem of *Billy Budd*," *PMLA*,

camp regards Billy's execution as sacrificial and redemptive, the other sees the execution as an indication of the horror of acquiescence to the status quo; correspondingly, Captain Vere is a hero in one camp, but a villain in the other. In all, the gulf between the two camps is so wide, and their interpretations of *Billy Budd* are so opposed, that some "neutral" critics have wondered whether the novel does have any real form or definite meaning; after all, a work which may be read to mean anything is a work without fixed significance.²

The two critical camps share the common assumption that Melville is to be understood finally as a proponent of a modern political ideology; in effect, one would have Melville be a follower of Burke, the other would have him a follower of Paine.³ This common assumption may be countered by observing that *Billy Budd* has an informing and underlying political theme which in fact calls *all* of modernity into question. This theme, which runs throughout the character sketches and events of the novel, points out the destructive effect upon political virtue of modern science, technology, and philosophy. At the very least, this theme reveals that Melville's supposed preferences for conservatism or revolution in the late eighteenth or nineteenth century were expressed within a frame which opposed the whole of modern times to the pre-modern past and celebrated the lost virtues of that

LXXX (1965), pp. 489-98; and Janis Stout, "Melville's Use of the Book of Job," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XXV (1970), pp. 69-83.

Also, for the development and variations of the "testament of resistance" interpretation, see the following: Joseph Schiffman, "Melville's Final Stage, Irony: A Re-examination of *Billy Budd* Criticism," *American Literature*, XXII (1950), pp. 128-36; Arthur Sale, "Captain Vere's Reasons," *Cambridge Journal*, V (1951), pp. 3-18; Leonard Casper, "The Case against Captain Vere," *Perspective*, V (1952), pp. 146-52; Karl E. Zink, "Herman Melville and the Forms—Irony and Social Criticism in 'Billy Budd,'" *Accent*, XII (1952), pp. 131-39; Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 355-414; Phil Withim, "*Billy Budd*: Testament of Resistance," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XX (1959), pp. 115-27; Ray B. Browne, "*Billy Budd*: Gospel of Democracy," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XVII (1963), pp. 321-37; and Kingsley Widmer, "The Perplexed Myths of Melville: *Billy Budd*," *Novel*, II (1968), pp. 25-35.

² See especially Kenneth Ledbetter, "The Ambiguity of *Billy Budd*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, IV (1962), pp. 130-34, and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., "The Definitive *Billy Budd*: 'But aren't it all sham?'" *PMLA*, LXXXII (1967), pp. 602-12; however, compare these with Ray B. West, Jr., "The Unity of 'Billy Budd,'" *Hudson Review*, V (1952), pp. 120-27.

³ According to Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., the editors of the definitive edition of *Billy Budd*, "the opposing positions" of Burke and Paine "concerning the doctrine of abstract natural rights lie behind the dialectic" of the novel (Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962], p. 138). This text will hereinafter be referred to as *Billy Budd*, followed by the chapter numbers of the "Reading Text" or the title of an editorial section, and page numbers.

past. In fact, a close reading of the novel will demonstrate Melville's understanding of the limitations of both Burke and Paine and will reveal that Melville's rejection of modernity was so comprehensive that he even dismissed Rousseau, a great critic of modernity, as yet another modern philosopher. In a sense, *Billy Budd* is Melville's "testament of rejection" and an indictment of the modern Enlightenment and its modern critics, Rousseau and Burke.

The very first words of the "Inside Narrative" point to the technologically backward past. "In the time before steamships, or then more frequently than now," there existed a phenomenal character, the "Handsome Sailor." This "Aldebaran" was found typically in the center of a company of his shipmates, accepting from them the "spontaneous homage" won by his unaffected "natural regality." Presumably, the "prosaic" present time of advanced technology and advanced science, which have produced the steamship, is inimical to this "natural regality," causing it to become extinct or, at least, rare. Moreover, a full understanding of the character of the "Handsome Sailor" reveals that the "Handsome Sailor" type is itself a representation of a universalized archetype of the far more distant and, in fact, pre-scientific past. This is indicated by the narrator's memory of the "remarkable instance" of a Black Handsome Sailor; "this black pagod of a fellow" was encountered some fifty years ago amid a group of mariners "of such an assortment of tribes and complexions as would have well fitted them to be marched up by Anacharsis Cloots before the bar of the first French Assembly as Representatives of the Human Race." This "motley retinue" showed that "sort of pride" in the Black Handsome Sailor "which the Assyrian priests doubtless showed for their grand sculptured Bull when the faithful prostrated themselves." Hence, the "Handsome Sailor" type, initially and significantly compared to "Aldebaran," the star which is the eye of the constellation Taurus, the Bull, is meant to recall the time of the Assyrian Bull. The "Handsome Sailor" thus represents an archetype of the earliest historical past, and that archetype is mythological and pre-scientific.⁴

The primary characteristic of this universal and ancient archetype is an attunement to nature. Thus, the "Handsome Sailor" embodies unaffected "natural regality" without artificial vainglory. Moreover, the instance of the "unadulterate" and "barbaric" Black Handsome Sailor suggests that the "superior" stature of the archetype represented in

⁴ On the universalized "Black Handsome Sailor," see Milton R. Stern, *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1957), p. 214; also, on the "mythical proportions" of the "Handsome Sailor," see Richard Harter Fogle, "Billy Budd—Acceptance or Irony," *Tulane Studies in English*, VIII (1958), p. 110. The "Handsome Sailor" type and the "Black Handsome Sailor" are described in *Billy Budd*, ch. 1, pp. 43-44.

the "Handsome Sailor" transcends the merely conventional national and ethnic distinctions which may otherwise divide his admirers. Since his superiority is according to nature, the Black Handsome Sailor evokes "spontaneous tribute" rather than conventionally enforced suspicion or prejudice. Finally, since this superiority is a natural endowment, the "Handsome Sailor" type represents a form of natural leadership which belies any artificial and purely conventional hierarchy which would assign a representative of the type, like the Black Handsome Sailor, to the rank of a mere "common sailor."

The natural superiority of the "Handsome Sailor" authorized his right to rule over his shipmates, who, as the instance of the Black Handsome Sailor shows, represent the whole Human Race. The archetypical "Handsome Sailor," the heavenly "Aldebaran" who embodies "natural regality," rules as god and king by natural and divine right. This claim to rule is in startling contrast to the egalitarianism of the first French Assembly to which Cloots brought his "Representatives of the Human Race" and by which both divinity and regality were abjured.⁵ While the Assembly denies any natural right to rule, the "Handsome Sailor" represents the ancient claim to temporal and spiritual rule as both king and god. This phenomenon of "the less prosaic time" thus embodies a natural hierarchy which distinguished a divinely authorized ruler from the ruled; this hierarchy is rejected by modern egalitarianism and atheism, and the character who most recently embodied it, however dimly, has been or is being destroyed by modern science and its technology, as here represented by the steamship.

The natural distinction of the "Handsome Sailor" type is based on his beauty, his strength, his professional proficiency, and a "moral nature" which orders or tones his physical attributes and which wins him "honest homage" from his shipmates.⁶ In all, the archetypical form of rule embodied by the "Handsome Sailor" is thus pre-scientific, mythological, natural, physical, and moral. It depends upon natural endowment rather than upon conventional distinction, and it was effectively and fully incarnate in the universalized, mythological, and distant past rather than in the immediate past or present. This natural form of rule is not only described without reference to modern intellectuality but in fact stems from a time prior to the differentiation of rational intellectuality as such, i.e., the time of Assyrian myths.

⁵ Melville apparently read of the Cloots episode in Carlyle's *French Revolution* (*Billy Budd*, p. 136). The intimate connection between regicide and deicide in the minds of Cloots and the more prominent French revolutionaries is explored by Albert Camus in *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), pp. 105-32.

⁶ Ch. 1, p. 44. Compare the description of the "Handsome Sailor" with Aristotle *Politics* 1254b.27-39.

That is to say, the paradigm of naturally right rule is independent of wisdom and existed before philosophy.

The importance of this sketch of the "Handsome Sailor" is revealed by the fact that the narrator explicitly states that the title character, Billy Budd, is to be understood as he compares to and contrasts with the "Handsome Sailor." Billy Budd is a "Handsome Sailor," that is, "at least in aspect, and something such too in nature, though with important variations made apparent as the story proceeds." Now, Billy is unquestionably a "Handsome Sailor" in his "aspect," i.e., in his physical beauty. Also, Billy is a "Handsome Sailor" in that he is a "mighty boxer" and "a proficient in his perilous calling"; aboard the *Rights-of-Man*, Billy easily drubbed the annoying Red Whiskers, and aboard the *Bellipotent*, he is quickly "rated as an able seaman." Moreover, beyond these physical and professional similarities, Billy is like the "Handsome Sailor" in "nature": science or knowledge is also a missing ingredient in his character. Billy, like the "Handsome Sailor," is a character who is essentially pre-scientific and who exists independent of knowledge. As the narrator states it, "with little or no sharpness of faculty or any trace of the wisdom of the serpent, nor yet quite a dove, he possessed that kind and degree of intelligence going along with the unconventional rectitude of a sound human creature, one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge." Billy, like the "Handsome Sailor," is naturally "sound" because he is without wisdom or the love of wisdom.⁷

However, there are "important variations" between the natures of Billy Budd and the "Handsome Sailor." First, Billy certainly possesses none of the "Handsome Sailor"'s actual or residual political nature, and his natural habitat is thus not in the ruling center of a ship's society. In fact, Billy is pre-political: "Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company." And again, the case of Billy Budd leads to the narrator's observation that

it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if indeed exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man.

Secondly, unlike the "Handsome Sailor," who is a "champion" and "a spokesman," Billy is "foremost" only as plunder for the impressing

⁷ The quotations in this paragraph are from ch. 1, pp. 44, 47, and 49; ch. 2, p. 52. For a view of the thrashing of Red Whiskers as a prefiguration of the killing of Claggart, see Leonard Nathanson, "Melville's *Billy Budd*, Chapter 1," *Explicator*, XXII (1964), Item 75.

officer, and he is possessed of a defect in speech. Billy's stutter, his impairment in *logos*, which is the foundation of political existence, is the symbol of his pre-political or apolitical nature.⁸

In his apparent physical robustness, his frequently mentioned similarity to the animals, his lack of knowledge and defect in speech, his apolitical character, and his natural barbarity, Billy Budd is an analogue of Rousseau's savage man. Billy is, as Rousseau would have it, "strong and robust," one of "the most advantageously organized" animals, and "committed to instinct alone." A "foundling, a presumable by-blow" without known parents, Billy Budd is like a child of Rousseau's savages, who "united fortuitously, depending upon encounter, occasion, and desire," and who "left each other with the same ease." Moreover, having witnessed a "formal gangway-punishment" for the first time, Billy reacts according to the "two principles anterior to reason" which characterize the soul of Rousseau's savage man: he is "horrified" at another's suffering, and he resolves to assure his own well-being by a special "punctiliousness in duty." Billy is, in all, neither the product of a family bond nor a real member of a civilized society; he is an "upright barbarian" fresh from Rousseau's state of nature.⁹

Insofar as Billy Budd's nature is devoid of knowledge, he is similar to both Melville's "Handsome Sailor" and Rousseau's robust savage, but insofar as he is essentially pre-political, he is similar only to Rousseau's model of natural man. The destruction of the "Handsome Sailor" by modern science and enlightened philosophy indicates Melville's agreement with the anti-Enlightenment *First Discourse*, in which Rousseau detailed how "our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts toward perfection." On the other hand, the "Handsome Sailor"'s natural political superiority and his natural and divine right to rule indicate Melville's disagreement with the *Second Discourse*, in which Rousseau portrayed natural men as apolitical, equal, and free.¹⁰ However, despite this latter disagreement

⁸ Ch. 2, pp. 52-53; ch. 1, pp. 44-45; and ch. 2, p. 53. Billy's speech defect is compared on p. 53 to the crimson blemish on Georgiana's cheek in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark." Note that Georgiana is destroyed by her scientific husband, Aylmer.

⁹ Billy is compared alternately to a goldfinch, a horse, a nightingale, and a St. Bernard dog (ch. 1, p. 45; ch. 2, p. 52). Billy's experience with flogging is described at ch. 9, p. 68. Quotations from Rousseau are from the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), pp. 106, 105, 115, 121, 95.

¹⁰ *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, in *First and Second Discourses*, p. 39, and *Discourse on Inequality*, *ibid.*, *passim*. Despite the strong internal evidence of Melville's familiarity with the *Discourses*, there is no external evidence that he read or owned texts containing them. Melville did, however, buy and read a "much desired" copy of Rousseau's *Confessions*. See *Journal of a Visit to London and the*

about the nature of natural man, Melville's original assignment of unenlightened Billy Budd to the Enlightenment's vessel, the *Rights-of-Man*, indicates the author's contention that Rousseau is truer to modern principles and more consistent in stripping his natural man of *all* the traits of artificial civilization, including Reason. Apparently, Billy Budd, as Rousseau's savage man, is to be seen as the real hero of modern "liberal" philosophy, and it is thus Billy Budd who will be tested in the real man-of-war world.¹¹ The differences between the "Handsome Sailor" and Billy Budd, then, set the stage for Melville's demonstration of Rousseau's own errors; this demonstration takes place after Melville's total rejection of the dominant thought of the Enlightenment, a rejection which occurs at the very outset of the novel through the character sketches of the "Handsome Sailor" and Billy Budd.

Before relating the events of the narrative which will reveal the flaws of the modern "liberal" hero, Billy Budd, the narrator begins the introduction of the modern "conservative" hero, Captain Vere. Just as the description of the "Handsome Sailor" served as background for the sketch of Billy Budd, so now will the description of the Great Sailor, Lord Nelson, serve as background for the sketch of Captain Vere. Moreover, just as the "Handsome Sailor" initially called attention to a certain time, the technologically backward past, the Great Sailor initially calls attention to a certain time, the time of the political event of the modern age, the French Revolution. It is to be expected, thus, that the nature of Captain Vere will be revealed as it compares to and contrasts with the nature of the politically great Lord Nelson.

The time of the narrative is "the summer of 1797," a short time

Continent by Herman Melville, 1849-1850, ed. Eleanor Melville Metcalf (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), pp. 70, 84, 85. Rousseau was also apparently on Melville's mind as a subject for study at the end of his 1856-57 voyage, as witnessed by his notation in *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant, October 11, 1856-May 6, 1857*, by Herman Melville, ed. Howard C. Horsford (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 262. However, as an indication that internal evidence must be given priority over external evidence, note that Melville directly refers to Rousseau in his first book, *prior* to his purchase of the *Confessions*. See Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, in *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, I (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1968), ch. 17, p. 127.

Also, on Melville's relationship to Rousseau, see Charles Roberts Anderson, *Melville in the South Seas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 178; and on Billy's similarity to Rousseau's savage, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), pp. 74-83.

¹¹ As an indication of Melville's understanding of Rousseau's differences from the "liberal philosophers," note that Rousseau is excluded from the list of philosophers used by Stephen Girard to name his vessels, despite the fact that the *Rousseau* was one of Girard's "finest ships" (*Billy Budd*, ch. 1, pp. 48, 138).

after the spring mutinies in the British fleet at Spithead and the Nore. The mutinies, although begun in response to "practical grievances," soon were "ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames." Whatever may have been said for the justice of the original discontent in the fleet (and in relation to the grievance over impressment, much could be said), the fact is that the mutinies came to threaten the very existence of Britain, "a Power then all but the sole free conservative one of the Old World." The narrator observes that the complexities of the time should militate against quick and easy judgment about right and wrong; as that time was lived, the "genius" of the era was not clearly revealed and thus presented "an eclipsing menace mysterious and prodigious." In any case, the spring mutinies were finally suppressed, and the mutineers went on "to win a coronet for Nelson at the Nile, and the naval crown of crowns for him at Trafalgar." The subject of Nelson is thus raised in reference to the "plenary absolution" of the British mutineers, and a quasi-soteriological relationship between the Great Sailor and the Empire is suggested from the outset.¹²

The narrator's assertion that the material on Nelson will be "a bypath" is belied by the fact that his description of Nelson is obviously meant to parallel his description of the "Handsome Sailor." Thus, it is not surprising that he now returns to the novel's opening theme, the destructive influence of advanced technology upon a phenomenal human type. This return is concealed through considerable dissembling. While boldly asserting that the "nobler qualities" of naval heroes have *not* "become obsolete with their wooden walls," the narrator quietly admits that technological advances in sea warfare *have* caused "a certain kind of displayed gallantry [to] be fallen out of date." Moreover, he had recalled a prominent fact which runs counter to the thrust of his apparent defense of the continued existence of military valor; that is, he recalled that the first firearm had been "scouted by no few of the knights as a base implement, good enough peradventure for weavers too craven to stand up crossing steel with steel in frank fight." Any doubt about the narrator's real point is completely dispelled when he enters into his ostensibly unnecessary defense of Lord Nelson's gallant actions at Trafalgar and begins by saying, significantly, that Nelson's enshrined *Victory* is not only a monument to the man, but also "a poetic reproach . . . to the *Monitors* and yet mightier hulls of the European ironclads."¹³ It is clear, thus, that modern technological advances like "ironclads" and other "inventions of our time" *have* had the same destructive effect on Great Sailors as the steamship has had

¹² *Ibid.*, ch. 3, pp. 54-56; ch. 8, p. 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ch. 4, pp. 56-57. The dissembling of this "bypath" is noted by Stern, *Fine Hammered Steel*, p. 207.

on "Handsome Sailors." The actions of Nelson need to be defended precisely because modern technology has made courage otiose and "displayed gallantry" obsolete.

Further, the narrator reveals that the character of the Great Sailor, like the character of the "Handsome Sailor," runs counter to modern philosophical tenets. Thus, Nelson's "priestly" sacrifice at Trafalgar savors of "foolhardiness and vanity" to the modern tastes of "martial utilitarians" and "Benthamites of war." However, according to the narrator, these moderns are simply blind to the true nature of the Great Sailor. At Copenhagen, this same supposedly reckless Nelson was "painstakingly circumspect" in the face of danger, and he thereby revealed that his actions are always directed and adjusted in terms of ends which are ignored by the "utilitarians": that is, the Great Sailor acts in terms of the ends of ultimate national victory and personal honor; he subordinates all considerations of means or method to these ends, and he is prepared both to make the greatest sacrifice for the greatest victory and to exercise the greatest care for lesser battles. The "utilitarians" actually presuppose that the highest good is self-preservation, while the Great Sailor is contemptuous of mere self-preservation. For Nelson, this dictate alone is binding: "Personal prudence, even when dictated by quite other than selfish considerations, 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."¹⁴

The homage won by the "Handsome Sailor" made him the personal foundation of a political community; the actions of the Great Sailor reveal that he is the preserver of the work of the founder; hence, in "the same year with this story," Nelson was assigned to the *Theseus* to restore order to that mutinous vessel.¹⁵ While the "Handsome Sailor" is an anomalous natural king, the Great Sailor is a conventionally distinguished natural nobleman, and while the "Handsome Sailor" is a universal phenomenon, the Great Sailor is a national phenomenon.¹⁶ In all, the Great Sailor complements the naturally prior character of the "Handsome Sailor" and completes Melville's picture of political virtue: a natural king, god, and founder is portrayed beside a national nobleman, priest, and savior; a character who ultimately points back to an ancient archetype drawn from a mythological and political natural

¹⁴ Ch. 4, pp. 57-58.

¹⁵ Ch. 5, p. 59. This is a historical episode in Nelson's career (*ibid.*, pp. 151-52). Melville reveled in the symbolic richness that could be gleaned from "actual reality." See especially his "Agatha Letter" to Nathaniel Hawthorne, August 13, 1852, in *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 153-61.

¹⁶ Hence all the "naval magnates" listed before the defense of Nelson are identified or easily identifiable with their countries (ch. 4, p. 56).

state is joined by a character who ultimately points back to an ancient archetype drawn from an Aristotelian *polis* and an Aristotelian great-souled man.¹⁷ Despite any distinctions between these two phenomenal types, however, they share a common fate: extinction at the hands of modern technology and philosophy.

Now, it is clear that Captain Vere has the aspect and something of the nature of a Great Sailor. At night, out of uniform and on the open deck, Captain Vere's unadorned person nevertheless suggests to all "a virtue aristocratic in kind." Vere is a naturally gallant "sailor of distinction even in a time prolific of renowned seamen." He is "allied to the higher nobility"; he is always "mindful of the welfare of his men"; and he never tolerates "an infraction of discipline." It is apparent that Vere's discipline compares favorably to Nelson's; Nelson was successfully sent to the *Theseus* "not indeed to terrorize the crew into base subjection, but to win them, by force of his mere presence and heroic personality," back to loyalty, and Vere is also able to win conscientious attention to duty from the recently mutinous crew of the *Bellipotent* without resorting to despotism. While, on some vessels, the lieutenants felt compelled "to stand with drawn swords behind the men working the guns," aboard the *Bellipotent*, "very little in the manner of the men and nothing obvious in the demeanor of the officers would have suggested to an ordinary observer that the Great Mutiny was a recent event." The *Bellipotent* escaped both abrasive "precautionary" tactics by the officers and any resulting open hostility on the part of the crew, and the reason is attributable to Vere: "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."¹⁸ Vere's aspect and natural qualifications are thus evidently those of a Great Sailor.

However, there is also an important variation between Vere and the Great Sailor. The narrator's quotation of an "apt" remark about Vere reveals that his character, while in part like that of a Great Sailor, also differs from that of a Great Sailor: "Vere is a noble fellow, Starry Vere. 'Spite the gazettes, Sir Horatio . . . is at bottom scarce a better seaman or fighter. But between you and me now, don't you think there is a queer streak of the pedantic running through him? Yes, like the King's yarn in a coil of navy rope?" This streak of the "King's yarn," not present in Nelson, is Vere's "leaning toward everything intellectual." In the eyes of his fellow-officers, Vere is "Starry" and a "dry and bookish" man because he reads non-technical and non-professional "books treating of actual men and events no matter of

¹⁷ See Warner Berthoff, "'Certain Phenomenal Men': The Example of *Billy Budd*," *ELH*, XXVII (1960), pp. 343-46, and *passim*. Compare Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1123a34-1125a35.

¹⁸ Ch. 5, p. 59; ch. 6, pp. 59-60.

what era—history, biography, and unconventional writers like Montaigne, who . . . honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities.”¹⁹ Vere’s soul, that is, is laced by a love of prudential knowledge, and as his name suggests both *vir* and *veritas*, his is the soul of a man of practical or manly truth.

As a reader, Captain Vere does not have a purely philosophical interest in truth, for as a person of authority, he must *act*; in action, truth gives way to prudence. Not given to unrealistic philosophizing, Vere is an analogue of Burke’s statesman, whose thought and effort aim only at the concrete and particular good of his own regime, and not at the abstract good of the Rights of Man. Vere’s studies serve as the ground for the political principles upon which he acts, and he thus stands “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.” Vere, Burke’s statesman, “disinterestedly opposed” the innovators “not alone because they seemed to him unsusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind.” Thus, Vere, Burke’s “philosopher in action” and captain or king of the *Bellipotent*, seems to have achieved that coincidence of philosophy and rule said by Socrates to promise an end to human or political ills.²⁰

Just as the nature of Billy Budd is a refracted image of the “Handsome Sailor” through the prism of Rousseau’s philosophy, so also is the character of Captain Vere a refracted image of the Great Sailor through the prism of Burke’s philosophy. As Billy is a particularly modern version of the ancient god-king, Vere is a particularly modern version of an ancient magnanimous man. Also, as the choice of the character of Billy Budd duplicates the critique of the Enlightenment contained in the very figure of the “Handsome Sailor,” so too does the choice of the character of Captain Vere duplicate the critique of the Enlightenment contained in the very figure of the Great Sailor. Hence, as the “Handsome Sailor”’s character questioned enlightened atheistic egalitarianism, and Billy Budd’s character questioned enlightened faith in

¹⁹ Ch. 7, pp. 63, 62.

²⁰ Plato *Republic* 473c11-473e5. The quotations describing Vere’s political stand are from *Billy Budd*, ch. 7, pp. 62, 63. Compare Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Thomas H. D. Mahoney (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1955), pp. 34-35, 37-39, 42-45, 55-57, 60-73, 101-2; also see Burke’s *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, in *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865), I, pp. 530-31.

On Burke, see Francis P. Canavan, S.J., *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), especially pp. 3-27, 28-53. For a view which relates Vere to Montaigne, see W. G. Kilbourne, Jr., “Montaigne and Captain Vere,” *American Literature*, XXXIII (1962), pp. 514-17.

Reason, so does the Great Sailor's character question enlightened utilitarianism and Captain Vere's character question all enlightened "novel opinion." In all, Melville will test modern politics by testing the hero of Burke as well as the hero of Rousseau. Both Burke and Rousseau, though in different ways, attacked enlightened philosophy, and it is apparent thus that Melville agrees with Burke, as well as with Rousseau, insofar as he is an opponent of the Enlightenment; it will become apparent, however, that he disagrees with Burke's alternative to the Enlightenment just as he disagrees with Rousseau's.

It should be briefly noted that John Claggart, the character whose actions will reveal the flaws of Billy and Vere, is also sketched with reference to modern technology and modern thought. Claggart, who embodies a "natural depravity" which is seemingly impervious to the effects of historical change, nonetheless draws a certain benefit from modern technology and a certain protection from modern philosophy. In the first place, Claggart wins the position of "master-at-arms," an office which once involved "the instruction of the men in the use of arms, sword or cutlass," but which now, "owing to the advance in gunnery making hand-to-hand encounters less frequent," has become merely the office of a "chief of police charged among other matters with the duty of preserving order." An office which previously assigned an authoritative place to the courageous virtue needed in man-to-man fight thus has become, because of the technological advances of "niter and sulfur," an office for the preservation of mere discipline. It will be remembered that it was an *urbane* Serpent who wriggled his way into Adam's company with the "questionable apple of knowledge" and thus also with the basis of technology: as science and technology advance, civilization advances in complexity and therefore in its need for regimentation. Hence, the narrator observes, "Civilization, especially if of the austerer sort, is auspicious" to Claggart's depravity. Moreover, in the second place, modern thought, as represented by the jurisprudence of "Coke and Blackstone," has the effect of protecting vicious Claggart because it is unable to comprehend the full dimension of his evil. To understand Claggart as the embodiment of a "natural depravity," one must look to the "Hebrew prophets" or, if a non-biblical authority is demanded, to "the authentic translation of Plato."²¹ In all, modern technology and philosophy not only destroy political virtue, but also promise success and concealment to political vice.

The action of the novel flows automatically from the juxtaposition of its three phenomenal characters. Claggart's immediate hatred for Billy Budd leads him to involve Billy in petty troubles and then to accuse him of mutinous intentions. This sets a series of events in motion which leads ultimately to the deaths of Claggart and Billy and to the

²¹ *Billy Budd*, ch. 8, p. 64, and ch. 11, p. 75.

shattering of Captain Vere. The primary purpose of these events is the demonstration of the limitations of the proposed modern heroes, Billy Budd and Captain Vere. Further, the events ultimately reveal what it is about modernity which is so destructive of political virtue.

First, it should be noted that Captain Vere's actions and decisions are necessary ingredients in the "deplorable occurrence" which takes place in his cabin. Billy strikes and kills Claggart after the latter has accused him of mutinous intent, but it is Vere's decision to have Claggart confront Billy with his charges which places Billy in the murderous situation in the first place. It is clear, on the one hand, that supposedly wise Vere is actually fundamentally mistaken about Billy's character, and, on the other hand, that Vere's reliance upon a rational and quasi-legal preliminary procedure to "practically test the accuser" is a major error. In the first place, Vere mistakenly expects Billy to respond to and refute Claggart's charges, that is, Vere erroneously sees Billy as a real "Handsome Sailor," who is a reliable "spokesman." But Billy Budd is unable to speak and thus must *necessarily* resort to brute force; at his trial, Billy significantly says, "Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him."²² Moreover, in the second place, Vere's reliance upon rationally and historically developed English procedure is ill-founded precisely because it makes no provision for Billy's irrational action. Thus, on the one hand, Vere's ignorance of Billy's speech defect shows that the earlier suggestion that Vere was indeed both wise philosopher and king of the *Bellipotent* was erroneous, and on the other hand, Vere's conventional procedure shows that Burke's reasonable statesman, the "philosopher in action," may actually contribute to political tragedy. Burke's practical reason is not a reliable guide for action because it does not adequately provide against the irrational, and, in fact, it may provide the arena for the irrational's tragic fruition. According to Melville, the celebration of even practical reason has engendered a blindness to the possibility of irrationality; Burke's advocacy of practical reason over Enlightened "pure reason" does not save him from the dangerous error of ignoring the *alogon*. Thus, Burke's conservatism has not disproven the Platonic contention that philosophic rule exists only "in speech." In modern times, as well as in ancient, tragedy remains endemic to political life, at least where wisdom aspires to rule but cannot in fact rule. Perhaps politics without tragedy requires politics without philosophy.

Billy's inability to respond to Claggart's charges indicates the limitation of Rousseau's savage. Faced with evil, Billy becomes an instrument of

²² Vere's decision to test Claggart is explained in ch. 18, p. 96. Note that Vere is said (p. 95) to have "mistakenly" understood Billy's adieu to the *Rights-of-Man* as a "satiric sally"; this is indicative of Vere's misunderstanding of Billy, who is naturally incapable of satire, "sinister dexterity," or "double meanings and insinuations of any sort" (ch. 1, p. 49). Billy's trial remark is at ch. 21, p. 106.

evil: his arm shoots out at Claggart "quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night," and so Captain Graveling's "peacemaker" is turned into one of Lieutenant Ratcliffe's "fighting peacemakers," a cannon.²³ Billy requires the peace of the world of the Rights of Man as much as he helped to create peace aboard the merchantman named in honor of Paine's tribute to those Rights. The real and natural existence of human evil and depravity causes the ultimate destruction of Rousseau's savage man and reveals the error in Rousseau's hero. Confronted with unavoidable evil, either in the comical form of Red Whiskers aboard the *Rights* or in the tragic forms of the afterguardsman and Claggart aboard the *Bellipotent*, Rousseau's natural man is forced into a state of war because he has no recourse to speech or conventional procedure. Thus, if the case of Captain Vere shows that practical reason is not a sufficient condition for peace, the case of Billy Budd shows that speech is a necessary condition for dealing with evil. In Melville's political state of nature, men speak but do not reason: the Typees, for instance, are sometimes eloquent, but they never dispute and thus would not "support a debating society for a single night." And while evil is natural and therefore always will exist, it is only in artificial, advanced civilization that evil can be clothed and hidden by the "mantle" of "that manufacturable thing known as respectability," and it is therefore only in advanced civilization that evil is really efficacious.²⁴

It should be noted that the limitations or flaws revealed in Captain Vere and Billy Budd pertain to what Melville sees as their own modern elements. Burke's hero tragically attempts to use practical reason as a guide for action, and insofar as he attempts thereby to subordinate political life to the intellect, he commits essentially the same error as the "liberal philosophers" of the modern Enlightenment, who would have Reason purge politics of superstition, prejudice, and irrationality. Rousseau's hero is unable to speak, and this fatal flaw is merely Rousseau's radicalization of the notion he shared with the modern Enlightenment, namely, that men are by nature outside the *polis*. To be sure, both Burke and Rousseau in some sense rejected the Enlightenment by criticizing it, but Melville contends that neither Burke nor Rousseau transcended the Enlightenment. In tribute to their criticism, he entertains their heroes as the only possible modern heroes: indeed they are variants of the real, ancient heroes. (The ship's surgeon, who embodies modern science and is therefore closest to a true Enlightenment hero, is a mere caricature beside Billy and Captain Vere.²⁵) But Melville ultimately

²³ Compare ch. 19, p. 99, and ch. 1, pp. 46-48.

²⁴ *Typee*, ch. 27, p. 203; *Billy Budd*, ch. 2, p. 52, and ch. 11, p. 75. Compare *Typee*, ch. 18, p. 142, and Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, p. 37, on the naked passions of savages.

²⁵ On the surgeon, see *Billy Budd*, ch. 20, pp. 101-2, and ch. 26, pp. 124-25. According to Darrel Abel in "'Laurel Twined with Thorn': The Theme of Melville's

rejects the proposed heroes of Burke and Rousseau, and his tribute to them thus falls far short of approbation.

Billy Budd is so largely a negative work that it is difficult to discern any proposal which Melville believes is a positive alternative to the Enlightenment. It may be that he merely wishes to show that no modern thinker has been able to solve the problems raised by modernity. Indeed, he even deprives the reader of whatever solace may be drawn from the fact that Captain Vere physically survives the tragedy aboard the *Bellipotent*; Vere dies at Gibraltar from a fatal wound received in a battle with the *Athée*, dechristened from the *St. Louis*, and it is thus apparent that the worst elements of modernity are triumphing over the best.²⁶ One might conclude that Melville saw as the real tragedy of modern times the fact that there is no real answer to modernity. Paradise may be among the Typees, who live in "thoughtless happiness" amid natural plenty and merely comic evil, a life which can no longer be retrieved by modern men.²⁷

This problem raises the question of the true nature of modernity's destructive effect upon political virtue and human happiness. At the time of the "Inside Narrative," this destruction has already taken effect, and its inner workings are hidden from the reader's view: the "Handsome Sailor" and Great Sailor are already extinct or on the road to extinction. However, the reader does witness the ultimate destruction of the modern variants of these phenomenal types, and therein perhaps may be seen the true nature of destructive modernity. In fact, of course, this means that modernity might be revealed in Claggart's hatred of Billy Budd because it is this hatred which leads to the tragic events of the novel, and it is the destruction of these two characters which is most directly viewed. Billy's fate as Rousseau's savage man exposed the errors of Rousseau, and Billy's fate as a "Handsome Sailor" may expose the actual destruction of political virtue.

It will be recalled that Billy's similarity in nature to the "Handsome Sailor" lay in his lack of knowledge and in his essentially pre-scientific character. This facet of Billy's nature was revealed in terms of biblical

Timoleon," *The Personalist*, XLI (1960), Melville believed that "science and sophistry, if taken as 'the whole truth,' are both crass and stultifying approaches to reality" (p. 337).

²⁶ Ch. 28, pp. 128-29.

²⁷ See *Typee*, ch. 17, p. 128, where war takes the form of a "genteel comedy," and ch. 27, p. 204, on the Typees' "thoughtless happiness." Note that the narrator of *Billy Budd* claims that his story is "no romance" (ch. 2, p. 53). Melville's quasi-romantic celebration of the worlds of the Typees or the archetypical "Handsome Sailor" is the result not of a romantic, sentimental longing for an heroic past but rather of a sustained, intellectual critique of modernity. Thus, he places his last story a century before his contemporary romantic age, back into a time when the intellectual battle over the Enlightenment was still salient.

allusions to "the doctrine of man's Fall." Hence, Billy has no "trace of the wisdom of the serpent"; he had not yet been "proffered the questionable apple of knowledge"; and he was like Adam "ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company."²⁸ These biblical allusions occurred within a framework which actually related a secular version of the Fall of Man as a result of the "apple of knowledge," a variant of Rousseau's hypothesis that man evolves from a natural savage into a reflecting, reasoning, and therefore "depraved" animal.²⁹ Nevertheless, the biblical allusions are themselves important, for they point to the ultimate meaning of the novel. Thus, it is significant that John Claggart is explicitly given the role of the destructive Serpent in *Billy Budd*. Claggart's nature will "recoil upon itself" like Milton's Satan and "like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible"; Claggart ascends "from his cavernous sphere" to accuse Billy of mutiny; his glance into stunned Billy's eyes is "one of serpent fascination"; and moving his corpse is "like handling a dead snake."³⁰ Thus, Claggart's antipathy toward Billy Budd actually results in the re-enactment of the original destruction of the unsophisticated "Handsome Sailor" by the purveyor of the apple of wisdom, knowledge, or science.

This Satanic Claggart has one trait which distinguishes him from Melville's earlier villains, Jackson in *Redburn* and Bland in *White-Jacket*: his intellectuality. His "brow was of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect"; he was "dominated by intellectuality"; and he was "intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon" of Billy Budd. In fact, Claggart's perceptive intellectuality and Billy's simplicity combine to account fully for Claggart's malice towards Billy: "If askance he eyed the good looks, cheery health, and frank enjoyment of young life in Billy Budd, it was because these went along with a nature that, as Claggart magnetically felt, had in its simplicity never willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent." Unlike the god-like Dansker, whose knowledge of good, evil, and innocence leaves him yet aloof or transcendent, Claggart's similar knowledge impels him to a "cynic disdain, disdain of innocence—to be nothing more than innocent!"³¹ Billy Budd is thus destroyed by a person who embodies an uncontrollable hatred for innocence and an uncontrolled desire for the advance of wisdom. The destruction of the politically virtuous "Handsome Sailor" by modern science, technology, and philosophy thus points ultimately to the destructiveness of science or philosophy per se.

²⁸ Ch. 2, p. 52.

²⁹ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 110.

³⁰ Ch. 12, p. 78; ch. 18, p. 91; ch. 19, pp. 98, 99.

³¹ Ch. 8, p. 64; ch. 11, p. 75; ch. 12, p. 78. Compare *Redburn: His First Voyage*, ch. 12, pp. 56-62, and *White-Jacket: Or, The World in a Man-of-War*, ch. 44, pp. 187-90.

Like his contemporary, Nietzsche, Melville saw the consequences of modernity—egalitarianism, utilitarianism, scientism, etc.—as epiphenomena which merely made obvious the moral and political tragedy which was contained in the birth of philosophy. The attack on modern science and philosophy does not lead Melville back to ancient science and philosophy but leads him rather to an attack on philosophy as such. Claggart's intellectually grounded hatred for simple Billy Budd symbolizes the destruction of real human happiness, heroism, and virtue by the very spirit of knowledge. Moreover, it is impossible not to see Melville's own tragedy in the revengefulness and helplessness made apparent in his description of Claggart's murder by Billy Budd:

The next instant, quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night, [Billy's] right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck. Whether intentionally or but owing to the young athlete's superior height, *the blow had taken effect full upon the forehead, so shapely and intellectual-looking a feature in the master-at-arms;* so that the body fell over lengthwise, like a heavy plank tilted from erectness. A gasp or two, and he lay motionless.³²

Thus one witnesses not only the destruction of John Claggart, who is as pale as the Socrates of the *Clouds*, and who, like the Socrates of the *Symposium*, "never allows wine to get within [his] guard," and who, like the Socrates of the *Meno*, has a numbing effect on speech like a "torpedo fish,"³³ but also another "poetic reproach," this time the reproach of the poet, Herman Melville, to philosophy.

³² Ch. 19, p. 99 (italics added).

³³ Ch. 8, p. 64; ch. 11, p. 76; ch. 19, p. 98. See Plato *Symposium* 218a.2-8, where Alcibiades compares the "bite" of philosophy to the bite of a serpent. It is not unphilosophic, of course, to doubt the worth of philosophy. Thus, Socrates calls a city without philosophy "true" and "healthy" (*Republic* 372e.6-7). But Socrates goes on to construct the city of the philosopher-king, the city which is the standard of justice. For Socrates, tragedy is endemic to all actual regimes, and the untragic regime ruled by philosophy exists only "in speech" (*Republic* 472b.1-473b.3). For Melville, however, it is the *acceptance* of the rule of philosophy, ancient or modern, as the standard of justice which is the cause of political tragedy. Hence, Melville chooses not to transcend tragic politics via philosophy, but to seek to avoid tragedy by lowering the standard of justice. It is thus ironic that Melville, who saw through modern philosophy's insistence on its own unproblematic nature, followed the moderns in rejecting the high and in embracing the low. But perhaps it would be truer to say that Melville's rejection of philosophy is but the measure of his greatness as poet. On the moderns, see Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 295-98.