

Studies on  
Themes and  
Motifs in  
Literature

*The Moral World of  
Billy Budd*

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## Introduction

This book did not begin as a study of *Billy Budd*. It began, at the suggestion of my colleague Bill Vaughan, as a book on ethics and literature. He suggested that I use his teacher Peter Winch's essay "The Universalizability of Moral Judgments" as a starting point both because he knew that I admired his philosophical work and because he knew that moral questions like those Winch was investigating were an integral part of my approach to literature. The issue of analyzing *Billy Budd* arose simply because Winch uses it to exemplify certain aspects of his philosophical argument. This meant that, if I was going to use his essay as the focus of my study, I had to understand the text about which he was writing. The first step in such a project, therefore, was to reintroduce myself to Melville's work, a book I had taught only four or five times over twenty-plus years of teaching, all but once in the first five years of my career. The reason that I had stopped teaching it was that I had never been satisfied with the results. Being human and thinking myself a good teacher, I naturally attributed the lack of success to problems with the text, not to my understanding of it. However, to my chagrin, when I went back and restudied it, I found out that the problem had been mine alone. I had simply not attended to it with sufficient care to be able to grasp what the text was doing. Having come to grips with it in a more satisfactory manner and having come to a preliminary understanding of the argument of Winch's essay, I began looking at some of the texts in the field of ethics and literature. The approach I found there, which tended towards the normative, was neither congenial to my interests generally nor appropriate for dealing with either Winch or *Billy Budd*, so I decided simply to write on the critical implications of Winch's essay. However, the more I examined what Winch was saying, the less happy I was with his approach to this text. I did not, to be sure, disagree with his philosophical argument but rather with his approach to Melville's novel. It was at this point that I decided simply to write about how I understood the moral world of *Billy Budd*, incorporating those aspects of Winch's essay that contributed to an understanding of the novel literarily but generally working towards what is in some respects a conventional literary interpretation of Melville's text.

There are, however, a number of aspects of the interpretation presented here that are not entirely typical. It is especially atypical in its use of what I call the text's view. This is a concept I explain more fully in chapter 1, but for introductory purposes, I can say it is a working hypothesis as to the dominant values of a given text. What using this notion does is to provide the occasion for asking, although without requiring or even expecting any definitive answers, whether the text is urging the reader in a given instance to approve of or criticize a given idea or action. Asking these questions facilitates opening the moral world of the text to exploration, whether it be in regard to forming a judgment of the text's view of Lieutenant's Ratcliffe's impressing Billy or its view of Vere's condemning him to death. What one finds when these situations and others like them in *Billy Budd* are analyzed is that they are written in such a manner as to resist moral closure by complicating, in a fundamental way, the reader's judgment of what is going on in the novel. That this state of affairs was intended by Melville is documented in the Genetic Text which reveals the way he enhanced the complexity, not just of Vere's portrayal, but also those of Billy and Claggart. (John Wenke has given a clear account of this aspect of the text in "Melville's indirection: *Billy Budd*, the genetic text, and 'the deadly space between,'" discussed in chapter 7).

This way of conceiving the moral vision of *Billy Budd* obviously challenges what has been the conventional way of assessing its characters taken by advocates of the testaments of acceptance and resistance (perspectives roughly supportive and critical of Vere, respectively). Seeing the text as complicating the moral situations of the text in order to resist moral closure means that the critic's task will no longer be one of trying to establish one or the other of these two divergent options as correct. Rather than choosing one option or the other, the reader is led to lay these terms aside and, in the words of Conrad's Stein, "in the destructive element immerse" (*Lord Jim* 162). The interpretive environment created by such a perspective is "destructive" in that it leads the critic away from the familiar ground of either/or and towards an unknown ground, one that is neither neither/nor nor is it both/and. It is something else, something that resists concise formulation but one which, it is to be hoped, will become clearer as this inquiry goes forward. Preliminarily what one might say results from such an approach is that a picture of the world is presented in which it is necessary to understand the nature of the character who is called upon to decide and the nature of the phenomena about which he must make a decision. It is these things that the inquiry turns to because, when the analysis of the text reveals that neither answer "A" nor answer "B" accurately describes the situation found in the text, it is incumbent upon the interpreter to try another path. The first option that naturally presents itself is to refine one's answer relative to these options until they reflect as satisfactorily as possible what is found in the text. However, when

this satisfaction cannot be reached with any surety, it is equally natural to fashion another approach to the problem, such as turning from making a final decision to examining the nature of the characters within the text who are making the choices and the situations about which they are making these choices. At the same time, just as Vere or any officer will ultimately make a decision no matter how complex or difficult the problem, the interpreter should not be deterred, in the last analysis, from coming to the most reasonable conclusion she can based on the factors presented in the case at hand.

This resistance to moral closure may be clearly seen in the series of dichotomies through which Vere's character is presented. These dichotomies exemplify the text's resistance to moral closure by their not resolving in the ordinary way. Rather than trying to elicit a divergent decision in favor of one or the other pole of the dichotomy, they work to frustrate any clearcut resolution. One can, to be sure, see evidence of this tendency by consulting either the Genetic or the Reading Text, but it is only through inquiring into the text's view that these judgments may be seen actually functioning in the moral world of the novel. It is my belief that Melville's larger purpose in presenting the world of *Billy Budd* in this way is to demonstrate what he takes to be the nature of moral judgments as they are experienced by men and women. Through the instrumentality of its dichotomies and the other means used to put forward this perspective, the text leads the reader to experience what it is like to make decisions in the world.

Chapter 2 begins the section entitled "The Critical Heritage" although it should be emphasized that no pretense is made of dealing with the history of *Billy Budd* criticism comprehensively. Furthermore, although it has the general look of a standard review of the literature, it is both more selective and more intensive than most such accounts. Its forty-two pages deal with seven essays, the classic essays by Watson, Casper, Withim, Glick, Ives, Bowen, and Berthoff. These essays were chosen to spotlight how the testaments of acceptance and resistance began and how they evolved through some of the key essays of the fifties and sixties. I show how these critics either processed (Glick, Ives, Bowen, and Berthoff) or did not process (Casper and Withim) the text's moral dialectic. (Watson's case in this regard is difficult to categorize as will be seen). However, none of the essays which address the complexity of the text's moral vision by taking seriously both sides of its moral dialectic aspire to go as far as this study does in underlining the counter-pressures exerted by each side against the other, but they do provide a perspective on the nature of this tension in a way that contributes to deepening one's understanding of *Billy Budd*.

The next chapter deals with Paul Brodtkorb's "The Definitive *Billy Budd*: 'But Aren't It All Sham'" (1967). His is the first treatment of the text that takes with complete seriousness both sides of the text's dialectic. Brodtkorb points to the mysteriousness of the text, both in terms of how the reader experiences it and how the characters experience one another. This mysteriousness is not due simply to a lack of information but to the fundamental unknowability of human beings. Brodtkorb stresses the role language plays not in communication but rather in self-definition. He sees language as the way in which individuals project their reality outward, onto other people. Although language cannot adequately represent or even reflect reality, Brodtkorb feels that everyone believes, nevertheless, that his particular version of language expresses the world as he experiences it. He points out that only the Dansker has a grasp of others in any way comparable to Vere's, but the former's wariness constrains the role he is able to play. However, despite Vere's potential for encompassing the world outside himself, his lexicon, to use Brodtkorb's term, which tends to be "abstract" and "pedantic," limits what even he can do (Brodtkorb 608). Brodtkorb ultimately argues that *Billy Budd* sees accepting "annihilation," a term Melville used to reflect the fact that he does not believe in life after death, as the appropriate response to the moral situation by the novel (612).

Thomas J. Scorza's *In the Time Before Steamships: Billy Budd, the Limits of Politics, and Modernity* (1979) is the first of three books completely devoted to Melville's novel. Scorza, coming to the novel as a Straussian political scientist, sees the novel as an argument for poetry and against philosophy. The vehicle for this underlying argument is the text's critique of modernity. The novel in his view aggrandizes the past and critiques the present. The "time before steamships" symbolizes for Scorza that time before western culture embraced reason and philosophy. However, in the end he feels the text rejects not merely modernity but any philosophical path whatsoever, even those of Plato and Aristotle, because for him the birth of philosophy is congruent to the fall of man inasmuch as any philosophical perspective from his point of view dictates that the universe be approached through reason rather than through what he calls the "cosmic" view of things (Scorza 178). The "cosmic" view he takes to be Melville's own view which operates beneath the narrator's "biased" view (44). Because Burke and Rousseau are taken to be the embodiments of modern philosophy, they, thus, become the primary objects of the text's critique. What Scorza sees the text to be insisting on in its rejection of Burke and Rousseau is the superiority of nature to civilization. One of the primary implications of emphasizing the importance of nature is that it undermines the egalitarianism practiced by the proponents of reason. In Scorza's view it is only by adhering to the way of nature that human beings may again aspire to the heroism which he sees as essential to their ultimately triumphing over

their adversaries, both physical and moral. He singles out Billy's failing to be as successful and powerful as the earlier embodiments of the Handsome Sailor have been as a sign of the diminishment that modern philosophy, through its avatars Burke and Rousseau, has visited upon men. Rousseau, the father of primitivism, is implicated in Billy's failure because Scorza sees the young sailor's primitivism as being a factor in his lack of success. In addition, because Rousseau is a modern philosopher, Scorza further concludes that *Billy Budd* is a critique of modernity in general and modern philosophy in particular (29). Burke, the advocate of reason, is implicated in Vere's failure because Scorza sees the Captain's rationalism leading him to trust that Claggart and Billy's interview will yield the truth. Because this action on Vere's part provides the occasion for Billy's fatal blow, this becomes for Scorza the central event of the text rather than the trial because it is here that Vere's complicity in reason, as understood by Burke, is decisively revealed.

Hershel Parker's *Reading Billy Budd* (1995) is a different kind of work from Scorza's. His study is fundamentally scholarly rather than critical in its ambitions. He provides a full account of the novel's background both historically and textually as well as going through the text chapter by chapter. He is concerned in his analysis to make full use of the Genetic Text, holding that it is the *sine qua non* for any serious interpretation of the novel. Rather than arguing for a specific interpretation of the text, Parker rather lays out what may be called the conditions of interpretation. As a corollary to his emphasizing the necessity of using the Genetic Text as the basis for any interpretation of *Billy Budd*, he underlines the fact that the novel is incomplete which, in his view, means that anyone who makes a claim for what the text as a whole is will be building her house upon the sand. It is on this claim and his belief that the late pencil additions to Vere's character are an aesthetic flaw which both raise serious questions about his standing within the text and make the novel uninterpretable that this chapter will concentrate.

The last of the three book-length studies is Stanton Garner's *The Two Intertwined Narratives of Herman Melville's Billy Budd* (2010). Garner argues, in a manner similar to Scorza's, that there are two narratives, a shell narrative and a kernel narrative. The shell narrative is the one that can be grasped by anyone reading the novel. The kernel narrative is the underlying meaning of the novel which can be accessed only by seeing the text's invitation to interpret a number of passages ironically. Although Garner acknowledges the novel to be unfinished, he does not see it as incomplete. He feels, indeed, that seeing the text as incomplete is one of the barriers to interpretation which the profession has erected, all of which prevent readers from grasping the ironic intent of the passages to which he calls attention. When these passages are seen in their proper ironic context, they may be seen to support a reading strongly supportive of the testament of resistance.

Part I concludes with a consideration of John Wenke's "Melville's indirection: *Billy Budd*, the genetic text, and 'the deadly space between'" (2002). His approach to the novel comes closest to articulating the view I take. Wenke, like Brodtkorb before him, recognizes the legitimacy of both perspectives on Vere and sees the task the text sets the reader not as one of deciding between the two testaments but rather one of struggling with the clash of imperatives within the text and the resulting problematic of choice. His specific goal is to show, by a reading of the Genetic Text, that Melville intentionally complicated the moral dialectic by moderating any terms that seem to aggrandize one perspective over against another.

Part II consists of analyses of Billy, Claggart and Vere. In chapters 8 and 9, I show how the predominant perspectives on these first two characters are complicated to a lesser (Billy) or greater (Claggart) extent. Two salient issues come up with regard to Billy. The first is that, despite his goodness, he is given imperfections of various kinds. The narrator points out, relative to his stutter, that Billy should not be seen as a hero of a "romance" despite many critical attempts at allegorization (*BB* 53). In addition, his not reporting the afterguardsman for trying to enlist him in a mutiny of the impressed men is clearly a fault. These things show the text's desiring to avoid simplicities in even so seemingly straightforward a character (comparatively speaking) as Billy is. The second is that, despite the fact that Billy is obviously good in most senses, his goodness is such that it defies emulation on the part of the wide range of men and women. (This is an insight I owe to Jillian McLaughlin, a participant in a *Billy Budd* reading group I ran in 2010). This does not mean that his goodness is not good; it simply means that when holding him up as model, it is necessary to remember that his way is not a way that anyone is in fact going to be.

In the case of Claggart, the degree of complexity he evinces would be staggering were it not for the far more staggering complexity of Vere. In this chapter Claggart is seen, despite the nefarious nature of his introduction in the text, to invite the reader to experience, if not actual sympathy for him, the full depth of his character which is a near relation to sympathy.

The discussion of Captain Vere takes up over 40% of the text as it is his case above all that shows the text's resistance to moral closure. There are four subsections, focused, in the main, on the dichotomies through which much of Vere's character is presented. These dichotomies are not designed, as noted above, to be resolved by choosing one or the other pole as the correct response but rather to be dissolved, so to speak. That they are dissolved means that these dichotomies are presented in a way that shows the situation they concern cannot be adequately grasped by conceiving of these opposing terms divergently, that is, as though the truth of the situation may be found merely in one or the other of their poles. The first of the subsections deals with what

I call the two meta-dichotomies. These are the passages attributed to the honest scholar and the writer whom few know (*BB* 74, 114). Although these meta-dichotomies do not deal explicitly with Vere, they do have fairly clear implications for interpreting his character. Furthermore, they contribute in a significant way to understanding the larger philosophical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the text. The second sub-section deals with three of the central dichotomies used to present Vere. The first two are that Vere was an “officer mindful of the welfare of his men but never tolerating an infraction of discipline” and that “prudence and rigor” are required of him by the current situation (60, 103). The final dichotomy in this subsection is not phrased as a conventional dichotomy but functions as one, nevertheless: “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” (103). What I take to be the dichotomy here is the opposition between “authorized” and “primitive.” Each of one of these dichotomies reveals something basic about Vere and about the text’s moral vision. The third subsection deals with what I call the text’s master dichotomy, that between “moral scruple” and “military duty,” which provides the focus of his presentation to the drumhead court as he seeks to convince them to do what he feels needs to be done (110). As a part of this discussion, I present a general assessment of Vere’s character with special attention to the somewhat anomalous but crucial issue of “dreaminess,” an attribute which arises in the narrator’s introduction of the captain (61). The final subsection deals with the “private conscience,” both as a key element in Vere’s presentation to the drumhead court and as the focus of Peter Winch’s analysis of *Billy Budd* found in his essay “The Universalizability of Moral Judgments.”

## The Nelson Material and the Genetic Text

To conclude this introduction, I will address briefly the situation concerning what is called the Nelson material and its implications for understanding Vere’s relation to the Admiral. Anyone familiar with the Genetic Text knows the story of the writing, excision, and seemingly planned re-insertion of the Nelson material. However, its importance relative to my notion of the text’s resistance to moral closure and the fact that not everyone who reads *Billy Budd* knows this story dictates that it be retold here.

Hayford and Sealts, the editors of the University of Chicago edition of *Billy Budd, Sailor*, have analyzed Melville’s manuscript materials into nine stages—A, B, C, D, X, E, F, G, and p—within which may sometimes be found subsidiary stages such as *Ba*, *Bb*, and so on (H&S 236). The Nelson material that be-