Melville's Motley Crew: History and Constituent Power in Billy Budd

Author(s): David J. Drysdale

Source: *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Dec. 1, 2012), pp. 312-336

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2012.67.3.312

Melville's Motley Crew: History and Constituent Power in *Billy Budd*

DAVID J. DRYSDALE

In a recent issue of *PMLA*, Margaret Cohen commends gestures in literary scholarship that recognize the importance of the "terraqueous globe" as a unit of analysis. Twentieth-century literary scholars, she argues, suffered from hydrophobia: they too readily mapped the land onto the sea, imagining the ocean as a metaphor for landward practices. Cohen points out that, in so doing, they disregarded oceanic movement even when it was the explicit subject matter of literary texts.[1] Cohen and the other contributors to the *PMLA* feature establish what might be called, in the words of Hester Blum's contribution to the same issue, "Oceanic Studies": a scholarly focus that shifts away from "methodologies and frameworks imported from existing discourses" toward one that "takes the sea as a proprioceptive point of inquiry."[2] According to this nascent subfield, the sea is an insurgent space: it violates and defies representational

Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 67, No. 3, pp. 312–336, ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352,

[1] See Margaret Cohen, "Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe," *PMLA*, 125 (2010), 657–58.

[2] Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA*, 125 (2010), 671.

schemas through its liquidity, atemporality, and sheer uncontainability. The sea, according to Iain Chambers, evokes "the laboratory of another modernity, in which the hegemonic time and space of capital are viewed askance, diverted, and subverted."[3] Along with recent critical gestures toward a "postnational" or "trans-hemispheric" rubric for American Studies, Oceanic Studies seeks to discard the category of the nation as a primary lens. The sea offers a powerful metaphor for such efforts, its global currents suggesting the interrelationship between distant regions of the earth and, indeed, a trans-hemispheric and planetary connectivity that renders artificially discrete categories such as "nation" obsolete. "This fluid matrix," Chambers explains, "interrupts and interrogates the facile evaluations of a linear mapping disciplined by the landlocked desires of unilateral progress and a homogeneous modernity" ("Maritime Criticism," p. 681).

While the critics in this particular issue of *PMLA* rightly insist that the ocean should be considered on its own terms and remind us that it is reductive to conflate land and sea, they underestimate the extent to which the sea is also a space over which colonial and territorial lines are inscribed. Even as the sea itself is ignorant of national borders, the ships that traverse its surface are most frequently national entities that disperse colonial power and enforce boundaries between space. The sea is often a battleground between nations jockeying for position over strategic waterways; moreover, the sea is an avenue of international commerce and capital, its shipping lanes fiercely protected by national and commercial interests. To this day, national governments work to "establish sovereignty" over spaces such as the Northwest Passage and the Arctic Ocean.[4] While the sea itself may offer a model for an insurgent

[3] Chambers, "Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks," *PMLA*, 125 (2010), 679.

[4] Just one pertinent example is the Canadian government's deployment of Coast Guard vessels to the Northwest Passage. In October 2010 the *Vancouver Sun* reported that the Canadian government was considering arming icebreakers and redeploying Canadian troops from Afghanistan to the North in order to bolster Canada's claims to Arctic ocean space, citing concerns about terrorism, drug smuggling, and illegal immigration. Randy Boswell and Matthew Fisher, "Tories to Consider Arming Arctic-Bound Coast Guard Ships," *Vancouver Sun*, accessed 12 November 2010 at http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Tories+consider+arming+Arctic+bound+coast+guard+ships/3709855/story.html.

epistemological shift away from categories of the nation-state, it nevertheless remains a space that is always subject to inscription and organization by nation and capital.

Oceanic fiction offers a lens through which we might examine how the nation produces itself in part through its efforts to contain more seaborne models of community, intimacy, and belonging. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* (written between 1886 and 1891), this tension between the sea as a site of insurgency and its role in global colonial power comes to the fore. *Billy Budd* is among Melville's most divisive books. Critics tend to find in it confirmation of their own inclinations and biases, reading it according to a binary logic that insists it is either Melville's final "testament of acceptance" or his everlasting "No! in thunder."[5] Some readers point to Billy Budd's benediction "God bless Captain Vere!"[6] as Melville's own capitulation to the need for a strong state authority capable of exerting itself over the disruptive potential of a democratic mob. This reading concludes that the message of *Billy Budd* is that collateral damage is an inevitable cost of peace and stability and that it is better to kill an innocent man than to risk appearing weak in the eyes of potentially antagonistic forces, be they real or imagined. The contrasting view reads Billy's final words as an ironic parting salvo, a final realization of his own role in a narrative that has less to do with what actually occurs on the *Bellipotent* and more to do with the individual's meaninglessness as a cog in the machinations of power. In this reading, Melville looks back bitterly on a century that consistently undermines the potential of heroic individuals and forecloses the potential of radical change in the name of stability and a neutered version of "progress."

To read *Billy Budd* in either of these rigid fashions, however, imposes forms upon the narrative that will not admit contradictory or complicating information and that close the

[5] For a useful overview of the two "schools" of *Billy Budd* criticism, see Thomas Claviez, "Rainbows, Fogs, and Other Smokescreens: *Billy Budd* and the Question of Ethics," *Arizona Quarterly*, 62, no. 4 (2006), 31–34.

[6] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 123. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

novel's capacity to provoke deliberation and debate in its reader. Such "zero-sum" interpretations rob *Billy Budd* of its potential as a subversive inclusion in the literary canon and are, in fact, anathema to Melville's purpose. The novel takes it cue from its oceanic setting, refusing to submit to such circumscribed interpretations and undermining the constraints of such perceptions. As Lester H. Hunt argues, the novel's subtitle, "An Inside Narrative," points to the importance of perspective and, moreover, to the possibility of underlying counternarratives—or perhaps currents of thought—that exceed the confines of narrative.[7]

It is ironic that these critical debates over the meaning of *Billy Budd* mimetically reproduce the conflict that animates the novel's core, the conflict between the uncontainable oceanic potential of its eponymous protagonist and the nationalistic measured forms of Captain Vere. Set against the backdrop of the "Great Mutiny," an aftershock of the American and French Revolutions, *Billy Budd* describes a nineteenth century set into motion by conflict between democratic uprisings and the forces of state and colonial power. The Nore Mutiny, the narrator says, was "to the British Empire . . . what a strike in the fire brigade would be to London threatened by general arson" (*Billy Budd*, p. 54). In other words, the "irrational combustion," ignited "as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France" (p. 54), is an episode in an ongoing history of civil unrest and mutiny that threatened to grind British imperial expansion to a halt. The novel's setting, then, in the wake of these moments of resistance, describes the inauguration of a nineteenth century organized around insurgency and counterinsurgency, the former always resisting the imposition of the "forms, measured forms" so desired by the latter.

In this essay I examine how *Billy Budd* traces the state's ability to appropriate the potential of discrepant forms of political community in order to reify its own authority on the insurgent space of the sea. I begin by suggesting the ways in which *Billy Budd* embodies what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker

[7] See Hunt, "*Billy Budd*: Melville's Dilemma," *Philosophy and Literature*, 26 (2002), 275.

call "hydrarchy," an alternatively organized body politic that transcends categories of race and nation. My close reading of *Billy Budd* demonstrates how, in narrating Billy Budd's incorporation into the machinery of state power on board the *Bellipotent*, Melville's novella reveals the complicity between official accounts of history and the counterinsurgent project of colonial power. In *Billy Budd* Melville describes the birth of the modern political subject; this, however, will be a monstrous birth. *Billy Budd* charts the transformation of the vital, heroic political subject—the "Handsome Sailor"—into a modern citizen-subject who is characterized instead by his passivity, vulnerability, and ultimately his death. In the end, this narrative implicates the novel's critics as well, who similarly work to marshal the novel into a preexisting nationalist or ideological form. But much as the ocean itself resists artificially imposed borders and inscriptions, *Billy Budd* refuses to settle into such neat categories. Even as Melville depicts this process of historical fashioning, he also points to the ways in which such a logic might be resisted by a canny reader who looks to the "ragged edges" of historical narrative.

In her contribution to the *PMLA* feature on "Oceanic Studies," Blum suggests a focus on the sailor as a means of revealing new ways of understanding citizenship, mobility, rights, and sovereignty. "Acknowledging the sailor," she writes,

> allows us to perceive, analyze, and deploy aspects of the history, literature, and culture of the oceanic world that might otherwise be rendered obscure or abstract. If methodologies of the nation and the postnation have been landlocked, in other words, then an oceanic turn might allow us to derive new forms of relatedness from the necessarily unbounded examples provided in the maritime world. ("The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," p. 671)

In making such a claim, Blum situates herself within a recent body of scholarship that looks to the organization of sailors as an alternative form of community to the hierarchical constructions of belonging that characterize the transatlantic colonial

nation. Particularly important to this reconfiguration is Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's book *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000). In their study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century transatlantic shipping, Linebaugh and Rediker argue that the "hydra" was a metaphor deployed in transatlantic Euro-American discourse to describe the amorphous, multitudinous forces of labor. Derived from Greek and Roman mythology, the hydra was a dragon or snakelike creature with seven heads. When one of these heads was cut off, two more grew in its place. As Linebaugh and Rediker explain, the hydra offered a potent metaphor for the conflict between capital and global labor: colonial rulers

> variously designated dispossessed commoners, transported felons, indentured servants, religious radicals, pirates, urban laborers, soldiers, sailors, and African slaves as the numerous, ever-changing heads of the monster. But the heads, though originally brought into productive combination by their Herculean rulers, soon developed among themselves new forms of cooperation against those rulers, from mutinies and strikes to riots and insurrections and revolution.[8]

The figure of the hydra suggests a decidedly nonnational, often extraterritorial population that had little regard for international boundaries and demarcations. As a metaphor for a transnational body politic, the hydra evokes the uncontainable nature of an emerging working-class consciousness that cut across divisions of race and culture and threatened the structure of Euroamerican imperial power by defying the rigid hierarchies and spatial organizations upon which it depended. By confining together groups of disaffected and marginalized sailors, indentured servants, and slaves, transoceanic trade offered a breeding ground for a nascent proletarian consciousness.[9]

[8] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), p. 4. Donald E. Pease has already linked Linebaugh and Rediker's work to Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1855) (see Pease, "The Extraterritoriality of the Literature for Our Planet," *ESQ*, 50 [2004], 177–221).

[9] See Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, pp. 168–69. Paul A. Gilje critiques Linebaugh and Rediker's understanding of sailor society as a nascent class-consciousness: "Sailors were not a proletariat in the making, nor were they a peculiar

Poor working and living conditions engendered mutinous sailors; these sailors might, in turn, seize control of a ship and establish "hydrarchy," a loose form of democratic government organized from the bottom up.[10] Sailors organized in such a fashion might engage in piracy, attacking the merchant vessels upon which they had formerly been employed, disrupting the circulation of capital across the ocean.[11] Far from the reach of centralized authority, the ship at sea was an especially fraught space in terms of its revolutionary potential. Thus, Linebaugh and Rediker explain, "the ship . . . became both an engine of capitalism . . . *and* a setting of resistance" (*The Many-Headed Hydra*, p. 144).

Maritime trade was therefore a site of what Antonio Negri calls "constituent power," a "source of production of constitutional norms" that holds "the power to establish a new juridical arrangement, [and] to regulate juridical relationships within a new community."[12] Constituent power thus represents the potential for transformation from below and the possibility of an epistemological reconfiguration of the nation—a dramatic restructuring of democratic governance. Yet, even as the specter of hydrarchy threatened to undermine colonial expansion, imperial power depended on its laboring bodies. In order to pursue its transoceanic projects, the state needed not only to suspend the insurgent potential of constituent power, but also to incorporate it and appropriate its energies. Insurgency, in

brand of patriot. They were real people who often struggled merely to survive." These two categories are hardly mutually exclusive, however. Moreover, Gilje does acknowledge that "the stereotypical sailor represented a culture and value system that challenged the dominant ideals of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only did the sailor ashore reject the traditional hierarchy of prerevolutionary society, but his behavior represented the antithesis of the rising bourgeois values that became the hallmark of the Age of Revolution" (Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004], pp. 6–7).

[10] See Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, p. 144.

[11] Rediker elsewhere provides a convincing case for piracy as the origin of a radical working class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, linking the practice to the development of concepts of workers' rights and of union movements. See Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

[12] Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 2.

other words, must inevitably be confronted by its opposite, the delimiting, confining structure of what Negri calls constituted power. Constituted power is the conceptual space in which the unstable potentiality of constitutive power is redirected and constrained to a narrow range of "appropriate" expressions of political action: it resides in legal codes and provisions that, among other things, limits acceptable ways of "being" political citizens.

Billy Budd offers an account of the transition between constituent and constituted power. Throughout the novel, Melville's descriptions of Billy emphasize that he is a prepolitical, incipient citizen. He stands on the threshold of "citizenship," as it were, on the *Bellipotent*, just prior to incorporation into the ship's body politic. Melville identifies Billy with other figures who stand just beyond the limits of political culture, most notably children and animals. After his arrival on the *Bellipotent*, Billy is dubbed "Baby" Budd for his innocence. He is described as "possess[ing] 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 Budd*, p. 52). Billy is a "child-man" who remains in a state of "utter innocence" (p. 86). More than a simple innocent, however, Billy is truly a natural man. Melville's narrator repeatedly compares his understanding of the world to that of an animal. Though Billy is a foundling, the narrator comments that "noble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse" (p. 52). He takes his impressment "pretty much as he was wont to take any vicissitude of weather. Like the animals, though no philosopher, he was, without knowing it, practically a fatalist" (p. 49). His lack of self-consciousness is compared to that of a Saint Bernard dog, and he reacts to a fellow sailor's suggestion of mutiny "like a young horse fresh from the pasture suddenly inhaling a vile whiff from some chemical factory, and by repeated snortings trying to get it out of his nostrils and lungs" (p. 84). Melville's descriptions cast Billy as a prejuridical figure who, as a consequence of his sheer innocence and ignorance, has no understanding of the codes and conventions of civil society. He is

unsocialized and illiterate, cognitively prior to the word of the law, living in "lingering adolescen[ce]" (p. 50) on the threshold of political culture.

Billy is analogous to what Lauren Berlant calls the "infantile citizen," a kind of political subject who is marked by his or her naive ingenuousness, suppressed political knowledge, and unwavering faith in the nation's commitment to the "best interests of ordinary people."[13] Such an individual, Berlant argues, threatens to "disrupt the norms of the national locale": his or her innocence and illiteracy "elicit[s] scorn and derision from 'knowing' adult citizens but also a kind of admiration from these same people, who can remember with nostalgia the time that they were 'unknowing' and believed in the capacity of the nation to be practically utopian" ("Theory of Infantile Citizenship," pp. 28–29). The infantile citizen reveals the discrepancies between the utopian language of nationhood and the reality of political subjectivity. As such, the infantile citizen is potentially a subversive figure whose "stubborn naïveté gives her/him enormous power to unsettle, expose, and reframe the machinery of national life" (p. 29).

In *Billy Budd* Melville identifies Billy as an example of "the 'Handsome Sailor,'" "some superior figure of [the sailors'] own class" who inspires "the spontaneous homage of his shipmates" (*Billy Budd*, p. 43). The Handsome Sailor, Melville's narrator explains, is "ashore . . . the champion; afloat the spokesman" who is morally and physically beyond reproach, a platonic ideal of the heroic individual at sea (p. 44). Crucially, this Handsome Sailor embodies the potential of cross-racial identification and a fraternity that is not circumscribed by race, class, or national status but founded in the common experience of labor at sea—in other words, the hydrarchy. Melville introduces the Handsome Sailor through the figure of "a common sailor so intensely black that he must needs have been a native African of the unadulterated blood of Ham" (p. 43). The Handsome Sailor stands at the head of "such an

[13] Berlant, "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship," in her *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 27–28.

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" (p. 43). Melville's allusion to Anacharsis Cloots not only indicates the transnational and cross-racial makeup of the Handsome Sailor's "motley retinue" (p. 44) but also explicitly connects him to a transatlantic revolutionary movement. Cloots, a figure in the French Revolution, famously appeared before the French National Constituent Assembly in 1790 accompanied by his own motley retinue of thirty-six foreigners to declare the world's endorsement of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Melville suggests here that the Handsome Sailor is a focal point for a constituent movement of a revolutionary underclass, a figure around whom the "mariners, renegades, and castaways" of the novella might organize themselves.

On board the *Rights-of-Man*, Billy's qualities as such an individual make him a natural leader who transforms that ship from "a rat-pit of quarrels" into a cohesive community (*Billy Budd*, p. 46). Billy's presence, as the *Rights-of-Man*'s captain describes it, had a salutary effect on the ship's crew; it was, he says, "like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy. Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular; but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones" (p. 47). Billy, the captain says, is a "peacemaker" (p. 47) who transforms the character of the ship from one of strife to one of peace. This effect is spontaneous: the captain says that "a virtue went out," and that Billy did nothing in particular to bring about such a dramatic change in the sailors. The only sailor to resist Billy's natural effect on the crew, Red Whiskers, is ultimately pulled into line through the force of Billy's right arm; this too, however, is described as a spontaneous, unmeditated action on Billy's part: "So, in the second dogwatch one day, the Red Whiskers in presence of the others, under pretense of showing Billy just whence a sirloin steak was cut . . . insultingly gave him a dig under the ribs. Quick as lightning Billy let fly his arm" (p. 47). This spontaneous, electric action of Billy's arm has a unifying effect. Vere says that Red Whiskers, "astonished at the celerity" of Billy's action, "now

really loves Billy—loves him, or is the biggest hypocrite that ever [he] heard of" (p. 47). Billy, on board the *Rights-of-Man*, is the embodiment of the constituent potential of the infantile citizen to unite the crew in a fraternal bond. "They all love him," the captain observes, describing his ship as a "happy family" (p. 47).

Upon boarding the *Bellipotent*, however, Billy is impressed into the service of the empire, and becomes an object of state discourse. He crosses a threshold between the *Rights-of-Man*'s world of political idealism and the *realpolitik* of state citizenship.[14] In such a setting, Billy is anachronistic and anomalous. The encounter between the *Rights-of-Man* and the *Bellipotent* illustrates that no vessel is actually a free agent but is subject to the authority of the crown, obliged to "[surrender] to the King the flower of his flock, a sailor who with equal loyalty makes no dissent" (*Billy Budd*, p. 48). This crossing narrativizes the transformation of the natural man from the realm of the theoretical to the actual. The *Rights-of-Man*, named for Thomas Paine's 1791–92 essay, is an ideal state wherein hierarchies of power do not move to contain the kinds of potential force that Billy represents. Billy's crossing of the literal threshold between the two ships, however, reveals that on the *Bellipotent* things are quite different:

> But now, when the boat swept under the merchantman's stern, and officer and oarsmen were noting—some bitterly and others with a grin—the name emblazoned there; just then it was

[14] See John Bernstein, *Pacifism and Rebellion in the Writings of Herman Melville* (London: Mouton and Co., 1964), p. 203; Laura Doyle, *Freedom's Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2008), p. 206; and Susan L. Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), p. 144. Bernstein argues that Billy's impressment transfers him to a more complex, sinister world. The *Rights-of-Man* "symbolizes at once an unfallen world in which inherent evil does not exist, and also a primitive world . . . where man is governed not by a codified set of laws, but by natural law" (*Pacifism and Rebellion*, p. 203). Doyle says that Melville "understands his story as a parable of the social contract's troubles," which he explores through "his emphases on impressment, on the threat of mutiny, and on war as a hidden motor and profit within Atlantic culture" (*Freedom's Empire*, p. 206). Mizruchi argues that Billy's impressment "is clearly a move from a liberal democracy to a military state" (*The Science of Sacrifice*, p. 144). Noting Billy's inefficacy with language and Claggart's indeterminate race, she reads both Billy and Claggart as immigrants (see *The Science of Sacrifice*, p. 149).

> that the new recruit jumped up from the bow where the coxswain had directed him to sit, and waving hat to his silent shipmates sorrowfully looking over at him from the taffrail, bade the lads a genial good-bye. Then, making a salutation as to the ship herself, "And good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*." (pp. 48–49)

For the first time, Billy's good-natured innocence gets him in trouble: the lieutenant roars at him to stand down, taking Billy's gesture to be "a sly slur at impressment in general, and that of himself in especial" (p. 49). Billy's illiteracy—his ignorance of the codes and decorum of the military state—transforms into satire, a "sinister dexterity" (p. 49). Billy's movement to the *Bellipotent* transforms his words from geniality to insurgency, which, in turn, must be contained by the lieutenant. This act of mistranslation reveals the fundamental difference between the *Rights-of-Man* and the *Bellipotent*: on board the latter, Billy's qualities as the handsome sailor are recognized not for their constituent potential to found a more perfect political community, but as a subversive threat to the constituted power structures upon which the imperial state depends.

Constituent power and its cognates—mutiny, revolution, insurrection—are empty spaces in the ship's vocabulary. In the wake of the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, the word "mutiny" is taboo, and merely to speak of it is understood as a threat to the authority of the ship's captain and the kingdom. Describing the lasting impact of the Great Mutinies, Melville's narrator notes that "such an episode in the Island's [i.e., England's] grand naval story her naval historians naturally abridge," and even those who do mention the event give it "less a narration than a reference, having to do hardly at all with details" (*Billy Budd*, p. 55). As Melville notes, such an event is a blow to national pride, a family secret that must be treated with discretion. The *Bellipotent* operates under a code of silence. When Claggart first approaches Captain Vere with his accusation against Billy, Vere initially admonishes Claggart to "be direct, man" (p. 97); once Claggart elaborates his facetious worry that "the *Bellipotent*'s should be the experience of the —," however, Vere cuts him off, "his face altering with anger, instinctively divining the ship that the other was about to name,

one in which the Nore Mutiny had assumed a singularly tragical character that for a time jeopardized the life of its commander" (p. 93).

In contrast to Billy, who embodies the insurgent potential of constituent power, Vere represents the arresting force of constituted authority. Vere, the narrator says, resists anything that might have a destabilizing influence, whether on government, society, or thought. "His bias," the narrator says, "was toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines: books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era" in which he finds "confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts" (*Billy Budd*, p. 62). Vere is unmoved by the "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," not because the revolutionary talk of the late eighteenth century was "inimical to the privileged classes" to which he belonged, but because "they seemed to him insusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions . . . [and] at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind" (pp. 62–63). "With mankind," Vere says, "forms, measured forms, are everything" (p. 128).

Billy's blow against Claggart, however, threatens to disrupt Vere's beloved forms. Billy's blow represents the full force of constituent power: it is unmeasured, passionate, and the spontaneous eruption that speaks in the stead of a silenced, marginalized body: "quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck" (*Billy Budd*, p. 99). Melville's simile, comparing Billy's blow to the flame of a cannon, connects Billy's action to the martial context of *Billy Budd* and the "irrational combustion" of the French Revolution. Rather than instantiating a revolutionary change in the order of the ship, however, Billy's blow instigates the consolidation of constituted power. The killing of Claggart propels Billy into the narrative logic of state power, which works to trim off what Berlant calls the "ambivalent knowledge" of social criticism and dissenting voices ("Theory of Infantile Citizenship," p. 51). Claggart's death signifies that

the world of the *Bellipotent* is a postlapsarian world, and Billy Budd, the infantile insurgent, will be the sacrifice that ushers in the nineteenth century.

On board the *Bellipotent*, Vere maintains his power largely through his ability to control and contain such "ambivalent knowledge." In the wake of Billy's killing of Claggart, Vere instructs the surgeon to summon the ship's lieutenants, but charges his men to keep the matter to themselves. Vere is determined "to guard as much as possible against publicity" (*Billy Budd*, p. 103). Melville's narrator compares this decision to the policies of Peter the Great of Russia, who, as Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., note, signified for Melville authoritarianism and martial law.[15] As Lester H. Hunt argues, the narrator's reference to Peter the Great makes it clear that Vere's politics are of the sort where power is seized and held.[16] Moreover, the allusion suggests that this autocratic authority claimed by Vere is dependent on a kind of publications ban and his control over information and narrative. Indeed, in Billy's trial, Vere appears "necessarily . . . as the sole witness . . . , temporarily sinking his rank, though singularly maintaining it in a matter apparently trivial, namely, that he testified from the ship's weather side, with that object having caused the court to sit on the lee side" (*Billy Budd*, p. 105). Melville's inclusion of this "apparently trivial" detail indicates that even as Vere appears to "[sink] his rank," his testimony comes from a position of authority: his insistence that he testify from the weather side follows naval convention that that side of the ship was reserved for the captain.[17] Vere thus reminds those in the courtroom of his rank even in the act of denying it, and maintains his authority as sole arbiter of justice on the ship. Moreover, he exercises strict control over the narrative of Billy's crime as well. Acting as both the case's only witness and Billy's prosecutor, Vere appropriates a position of supreme sovereignty over the hearing. Though he occasionally concedes his authority to "the first

[15] See Hayford and Sealts, "Notes and Commentary," in *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, pp. 177–78.

[16] See Hunt, "*Billy Budd*: Melville's Dilemma," p. 285.

[17] See Royal W. Connell and William P. Mack, *Naval Ceremonies, Customs, and Traditions*, 6th ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004), p. 319.

lieutenant, who at the outset had not unnaturally assumed primacy in the court," Vere does so at his own whim, not according to military convention (*Billy Budd*, p. 108). Indeed, after offering his arguments for punishing Billy, the first lieutenant assumes power only after being "overrulingly instructed by a glance from Captain Vere, a glance more effective than words" (p. 108). Vere never relinquishes authority completely, and even when he appears to do so, it is mere dissemblance. Vere determined Billy's fate immediately after the foretopman's act of violence against Claggart: he calls him "fated boy" (p. 99) and exclaims, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (p. 101). As Vere's officers realize, his arguments in the drumhead court are based on a "prejudgment" (p. 108) on the captain's part.

Through this process of apparently relinquishing his authority, Vere strengthens his power on board the ship, using the condemned foretopman to justify his excessive powers. In offering his argument to hang Billy, Vere repeatedly invokes a state of emergency by making reference to the recent mutinies at the Nore and Spithead, arguing: "In wartime at sea a man-of-war's man strikes his superior in grade, and the blow kills. Apart from its effect the blow itself is, according to the Articles of War, a capital crime" (*Billy Budd*, p. 111). When one of the officers protests that Billy "purposed neither mutiny nor homicide," Vere counters that "before a court less arbitrary and more merciful than a martial one, that plea would largely extenuate. . . . But how here? We proceed under the law of the Mutiny Act" (p. 111). Vere adopts the role of the sovereign insofar as he invokes his power to determine the state of exception.[18] Acting as both witness and judge, Vere marshals a series of emergency powers that he exercises in the name of stability. Beyond determining Billy's guilt, he goes on to defend the use of the death penalty by insisting that to allow the prisoner to live would result in chaos among the ship's common sailors, or, as Vere describes them, "the people":

[18] This definition of sovereignty is derived from the work of Giorgio Agamben. See especially Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), p. 15.

> "The people" (meaning the ship's company) "have native sense; most of them are familiar with our naval usage and tradition; and how would they take it? Even could you explain to them—which our official position forbids—they, long molded by arbitrary discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that might qualify them to comprehend and discriminate. No, to the people the foretopman's deed, however it be worded in the announcement, will be plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of mutiny. What penalty for that should follow, they know. But it does not follow. *Why?* they will ruminate. You know what sailors are." (*Billy Budd*, p. 112)

Indeed, by not punishing Billy for his alleged mutiny—which everyone in the drumhead court realizes was not mutiny, and was witnessed only by Vere anyway—Vere risks inspiring his sailors to "revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore" (p. 112). Clemency, Vere says, is an act of weakness: "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. What shame to us such a conjecture on their part, and how deadly to discipline" (p. 113). Vere recognizes that his power over the crew largely depends not only on his ability to mark the state of exception, but also on his capacity to narrativize that process in such a way as to appropriate the constituent power of Billy's blow into a sign of his own sovereign power. "War looks but to the frontage, the appearance," he tells his officers, and says that unless strict control is maintained over this "appearance," the sailors, even those who "share our own abhorrence of the regicidal French Directory" (p. 112), will be caught up in the revolutionary sentiment that erupted at the Nore.

To ensure that the sailors interpret Billy's hanging as he intends them to, Vere engages in a historical revision of the incident between Claggart and Billy. He convinces his officers first of the expediency of killing Billy by, as Nancy Ruttenburg argues, reducing the case to a tautology, deploying a hermeneutic strategy that "condemns narrative itself to irrelevance."[19] In

[19] Ruttenburg, *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), p. 351.

effect, Vere dismembers history: he tears apart cause and event, motive and action, and decontextualizes Billy's insurgent strike from its place in a longer narrative. Vere argues: "Quite aside from any conceivable motive actuating the master-at-arms, and irrespective of the provocation to the blow, a martial court must needs in the present case confine its attention to the blow's consequence, which consequence justly is to be deemed not otherwise than as the striker's deed" (*Billy Budd*, p. 107). Vere's convoluted, legalistic language here strips Billy Budd out of his historical presence: he separates actor and deed by confining his officers' focus not on the act's perpetrator but rather on "the striker's deed." To Vere's martial court, in other words, narrative, motive, and provocation are meaningless; the consequence of the blow is all that matters. Vere isolates Billy's insurgent act from its context, forcing his crew to set aside its incredulity that Billy would have committed such a deed, and, moreover, he separates the deed from any justification that it might have had. Vere condemns Billy himself to silence: during the trial, the first lieutenant offers Billy the chance to speak on his own behalf; Billy, however, defers to his captain/prosecutor: "the young sailor turned another quick glance toward Captain Vere; then, as 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'" (p. 108).

Billy's reading of Vere's countenance and his subsequent silence is puzzling, to say the least: Vere has just finished convincing the court that "the prisoner's deed—with that alone we have to do" (*Billy Budd*, p. 108). We might read in this moment, however, Billy's full incorporation into the social contract of the *Bellipotent*: he gives himself over fully to Vere, acquiescing completely to his authority, even at the cost of his own life. When Billy refuses the opportunity to speak on his own behalf, to offer a counternarrative to the one that Vere has constructed for the court, he crosses another threshold, this time from infantile citizenship to what Russ Castronovo calls "necro citizenship." According to Castronovo, in spite of republican citizenship's idealization of a public sphere characterized by rigorous debate and virtuous civic action, in the U.S. system "a body politic animated by republicanism ran the risk of

overexcitement and dangerous stimulation."[20] "Necro citizenship" thus idealizes a body politic characterized by passivity as well as homogeneity and historical amnesia. Billy's sentencing is the moment of his incorporation into such a model of citizenship. Indeed, even prior to his hanging, Billy is described by Melville's narrator as a deathly figure. On the evening before his death, the narrator says that Billy is "in effect . . . already in his shroud" (*Billy Budd*, p. 119). Laura Doyle points out: "When faced with execution, Billy implicitly accepts . . . Rousseau's dictum that the citizen must undergo the 'total alienation . . . of himself and all his rights to the whole community" (*Freedom's Empire*, p. 207).[21] Billy's innocence and naïveté were once potentially subversive qualities, but by the end of the novella they have become symbols of his lack of political agency. His state of being just prior to his execution prompts the narrator to compare him to colonized subjects:

> [Billy] was wholly without irrational fear of [death], a fear more prevalent in highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand nearer to unadulterate Nature. And, as elsewhere said, a barbarian Billy radically was—as much so, for all the costume, as his countrymen the British captives, living trophies, made to march in the Roman triumph of Germanicus. Quite as much so as those later barbarians, . . . and picked specimens among the earlier British converts to Christianity, at least nominally such, taken to Rome (as today converts from lesser isles of the sea may be taken to London). (*Billy Budd*, p. 120)

Billy, in spite of his Anglo-Saxon purity, has become akin to racialized subjects who were imagined as living outside of the political sphere "nearer to unadulterate Nature." Moreover, he has been turned into a trophy, a spectacular exhibition through which a colonizing culture tries to reify an unstable sense of racial or cultural superiority. He is an object that is severed from its place in the historical record. In the wake of his trial on the *Bellipotent*, Billy becomes an object of power that

[20] Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), p. 9.

[21] Doyle quotes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762).

consolidates state authority on the ship. Billy thus becomes a model citizen, a figure whose death disciplines his fellow citizens—in this case, the crew—into a political and social death of their own.

Indeed, the scene of Billy's capital punishment replicates itself on the members of the crew, quieting their discontent. At the hanging, Vere first recounts what has happened to warrant Billy's death: "he told them what had taken place in the cabin: that the master-at-arms was dead, that he who had killed him had been already tried by a summary court and condemned to death, and that the execution would take place in the early morning watch. The word *mutiny* was not named in what he said" (*Billy Budd*, pp. 116–17). Vere's narration reproduces the logic of the trial: it confines the story of Billy Budd to its consequences—a man died, there was a trial, and another now must die as punishment—divorcing narrative from its consequence.[22] 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" (*Billy Budd*, p. 117).

Just as Vere insists that Billy's blow speak for itself without the testimony of its perpetrator, he severs the consequences of Billy's insubordination from any potentially mitigating factors. The effectiveness of this strategy becomes evident in the scene that follows. The crew, sensing something amiss in the captain's story, becomes agitated only to be immediately silenced: "a confused murmur went up. It began to wax. All but instantly, then, at a sign, it was pierced and suppressed by shrill whistles of the boatswain and his mates. The word was given to about ship" (*Billy Budd*, p. 117). With Billy's example being "made to speak for itself," the boatswain's piercing whistles construct parallel scenes of punishment. Melville's verbs link the violence to be done to Billy's body with that of the whistle, another symbol of discipline on the ship. This circuit culminates in Billy's actual death. As Billy is hanged, he famously offers his last words, "God bless Captain Vere!" (p. 123). The crew,

[22] See Ruttenburg, *Democratic Personality*, pp. 352–53.

"without volition, as it were, as if indeed the ship's populace were but the vehicles of some vocal current electric," echoes Billy's final benediction, an action that leaves Vere standing "erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorer's rack" (pp. 123, 124). Melville's narrator links once again the disciplining of Billy to that of the crew: his body is theirs, and his final words are theirs. This, in turn, is revealed as a source of the colonial captain's potency, as Melville deploys a phallic metaphor that is folded into the symbol of the "musket in the ship-armorer's rack," a weapon of the colonial engine.

Melville's novella narrates how the ship of state transforms constituent power, embodied in Billy Budd's Adamic innocence and purity, into something corrupt and threatening. As a consequence of the textual mediations of Vere, Billy, a figure of a prelapsarian, premodern past, becomes the man whom he killed, Claggart. When the events on board the ship are reported in "News from the Mediterranean," the figures' virtues and flaws are reversed:

> "John Claggart, the ship's master-at-arms, discovering that some sort of plot was incipient among an inferior section of the ship's company, and that the ringleader was one William Budd; he, Claggart, in the act of arraigning the man before the captain, was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath knife of Budd." (*Billy Budd*, p. 130)

In the "News from the Mediterranean" section of *Billy Budd*, Billy becomes characterized by his "extreme depravity"; Claggart, in contrast, possesses a "strong patriotic impulse" (p. 130). Ultimately, Melville suggests that the nature of state power is such that it transforms innocence into depravity, constituent power into criminality. In *Billy Budd* Melville discloses the narrative and even aesthetic relationship between insurgency and counterinsurgency. Vere is not simply an authority figure, but an authorial one. His narrative decisions—to censor certain pieces of information and to control the attention of his "readers"—determine the meaning of Billy's life and death on board the ship. Vere's account of Billy's blow against Claggart transforms a spontaneous gesture of frustration into an act of mutiny, transforming innocence into rebellion. The great irony

of *Billy Budd* is that there is no mutiny on board the *Bellipotent* until Vere makes it so. Melville emphasizes, then, the power of narrative not only to contain constituent power but also to channel it, to transform the insurgent into a kind of *homo sacer* through whom constituted power establishes its own sovereignty.[23]

With that said, Vere, too, is almost as much of an object of authority as Billy is. Though as captain he exerts supreme control over his ship, Vere's authority always operates in deference to the external authority of the nation, whether it is manifest in the "Articles of War" under which he feels compelled to operate or in the buttons of his uniform:

> " . . . do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true, that in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents." (*Billy Budd*, p. 110)

Vere recognizes that as a citizen, and in particular as an official, he lacks agency and is instead little more than a conduit for the expression of the law. As Doyle points out, Vere insists that the officers do not put Billy to death, but rather the law acting through the officers does.[24] Vere denies his own agency even as he condemns and executes Billy Budd, an act that reproduces in the potential citizen his own self-abnegation. Vere does not act, as Thomas Claviez argues, from a position of self-exemption from the rules, but rather as an expression of the law.[25] He is thus not quite a villain, as Kevin Goddard supposes,[26] but rather he is an exemplar of model citizenship, just as Billy is. This is the tragedy of the nineteenth century as Melville imagined it, looking back from the 1890s: the political subjects of an imperial century are unable to read past the

[23] See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 8.

[24] See Doyle, *Freedom's Empire*, p. 209.

[25] See Claviez, "Rainbows, Fogs, and Other Smokescreens," pp. 42–43.

[26] See Goddard, "Hanging Utopia: *Billy Budd* and the Death of Sacred History," *Arizona Quarterly*, 61, no. 4 (2005), 106.

"frontage" and submit to the "forms, measured forms" imposed upon them by state power.

Crucially, Vere frames his argument by contrasting his status as a representative of the king with the turbulent waters of the sea, or, as he puts it, "Nature primeval." Vere argues that, in donning the costume of king and country, he has rejected his affinity toward uncontainable currents of the ocean in favor of the stable structures offered by the nation form, whether it be expressed in the buttons on his coat or the codified law of the Mutiny Act. The nation offers Vere comfort in the form of security, a security that was violated by the insurgent potential of Billy Budd's spontaneous fist. Vere has chosen the artificially constructed, but secure, forms provided by national models of belonging over the unmediated form of agency represented by an oceanic state of nature as well as by Billy's spontaneous strike. This practice of reading provides the foundation for Vere's counterinsurgent strategy: as reader and interpreter of Billy's insurgent action, he deploys a methodology that emphasizes stability at the expense of uncertainty, and that emphasizes comforting, familiar frameworks in place of ambiguity and doubt, denying the constitutive potential of Billy and the discrepant power of the hydrarchy. Vere, in other words, reproduces the nation on board the *Bellipotent* through his discursive containment of such discrepant, nonnational forms of community and belonging as the hydrarchy and the motley crew that are embodied in Melville's Handsome Sailor.

Vere is not alone in his preference, however. As I noted at the beginning of this essay, criticism of *Billy Budd* tends to fall into two camps, reading the novel as a testament either of acceptance or of resistance. Reading *Billy Budd* in either of these rigid fashions imposes forms on the narrative that will not admit contradictory or complicating information. Much as Vere excises the mitigating antagonism between Claggart and Billy so as to shore up his own authority on the ship, a closed reading of the novella robs *Billy Budd* of its potential as a subversive inclusion in the literary canon. Robert Milder adds that *Billy Budd* seems to be carefully crafted to thwart such

determinate readings. Melville, Milder says, is "a politic agnostic": "he 'doesn't know' with finality—not because he is indifferent but because he sees too much."[27]

The narrator's ongoing metacommentary on the nature of history and narrative lends credence to this hypothesis. For example, the narrator claims that he is incapable of assaying the logic of Claggart's sociopathy. Similarly, he is unable to penetrate the interiority of Vere's thoughts and evaluate objectively whether or not he is sane or mad. After Vere leaves to call the drumhead court, the surgeon can only speculate: "Was Captain Vere suddenly affected in his mind, or was it but a transient excitement, brought about by so strange and extraordinary a tragedy? . . . Was he unhinged?" (*Billy Budd*, pp. 101–2). The narrator can offer no explanation: "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" (p. 102). Instead, the narrator says, it is up to the reader to make his or her own decision. As Mizruchi notes, such uncertainty is crucial to the narrator's aesthetic method.[28] The novella consistently leaves "the truth" as an open question, up to the reader to answer for himself or herself. Therein lies the final "lesson" of *Billy Budd*. If the Melville of "Hawthorne and his Mosses" (1850) lamented his lack of a receptive audience, then the Melville of *Billy Budd* tries to inculcate into his reader a sense of what it means to be that audience. The novella compels the reader to engage in reading as an active practice that involves the weighing of evidence, the consideration of mitigating circumstances, and the onerous questions of expediency and necessity with which Vere himself wrestles.

Restoring *Billy Budd* to its oceanic context, however, allows its readers and critics to engage again with Billy's constituent potential. Billy, the necro citizen, is so amenable to Vere's machinations precisely because of his naïveté and innocence.

[27] Robert Milder, *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), p. 241.

[28] See Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice*, pp. 156–57.

Billy lacks the ability to properly read the signs and structures of power that operate on board the *Bellipotent*. Unable to comprehend irony or double meanings, Billy plays into the hands of power and reveals himself as the ideal subject of state power. But in *Billy Budd* Melville tries to equip his reader against such a fate. He writes:

> The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial. (*Billy Budd*, p. 128)

Melville urges his reader to look to the "ragged edges" in search of the "truth uncompromisingly told"—to examine more skeptically, in other words, the well-wrought urns of "official narratives" and romanticized histories to find the "Truth" revealed by the insurgent author. In *Billy Budd* Melville asks his reader to look past the aesthetically pleasing finitude to the discarded fragments, and to inspect instead the "ragged edges" that bind together national narratives like that in "News from the Mediterranean." What Melville proposes, in other words, is a recognition that "history" is not a self-sustaining coherent whole, but an assemblage that can be fruitfully read by paying close attention to the lines at which narrative tries to suture it together. Focusing on the "ragged edges" of history—on those figures who speak, write, and act in and from the margins of official historical discourse—offers an insurgent practice of reading that intervenes against the totalizing narratives of being American in the nineteenth century. Such a practice looks beyond the "architectural finial[s]" of monumental history and instead situates American history and literature in the context of an ongoing tension between constituent and constituted power. By focusing on the ways in which state power dismembers discrepant narratives of nonnational expressions of citizenship and reconsolidates the national body in figures who, like Billy Budd and Captain Vere, are characterized by their passivity and inaction, *Billy Budd* exposes the ways in which such challenges to the coherence of the nation were in various

ways contained and processed back into stable models of pseudo-democratic citizenship.

University of Western Ontario

ABSTRACT

David J. Drysdale, "Melville's Motley Crew: History and Constituent Power in *Billy Budd*" (pp. 312–336)

This essay reads Herman Melville's final novel *Billy Budd* (written 1886–1891) in light of recent scholarly interventions into "oceanic studies." Melville's parable of authority and resistance reveals how oceanic forms of power are contained and appropriated by national discourse. Focusing especially on the vexed relationship between the eponymous "Handsome Sailor" and Captain Vere, the essay claims that *Billy Budd* depicts the conflict between the transformative potential of what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker term "hydrarchy" and the "formed, measured forms" favored by Vere and the nation-state he represents. In narrating Billy Budd's incorporation into the machinery of state power on board the *Bellipotent*, Melville's novella reveals the complicity between official accounts of history and the counterinsurgent project of colonial power. Even as Melville depicts this process of historical fashioning, however, he also points to ways in which such a logic might be resisted by a canny reader who looks to the "ragged edges" of narrative.

Keywords: Herman Melville; *Billy Budd*; oceanic fiction; citizenship; insurgency