

NEW ESSAYS ON *BILLY BUDD*

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Fournier 12.5/14 pt.     *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [T<sub>B</sub>]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 41778 3 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 42829 7 paperback

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Billy Budd *and American labor unrest:*  
*the case for striking back*

*Larry J. Reynolds*

It seems an inconsistency to assert unconditional democracy in all things, and yet confess a dislike to all mankind – in the mass. But not so.

– MELVILLE, Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne (June 1851)<sup>1</sup>

“The times are revolutionary,” declared John Swinton, the former editor of the *New York Sun*,<sup>2</sup> and his fellow New Yorker Herman Melville surely agreed, for the times were the mid-1880s and the United States was experiencing one of the most sustained periods of violent labor unrest in its history. The French revolution of 1871 marked the beginning of three decades of bitter class struggle in America as workers, influenced by the worldwide socialist movement, struck for better wages, shorter hours, and improved working conditions. The vast influx of eight million immigrants into the United States during 1870–90 led to a cycle of wage-cutting, union organization, strikes, and reaction. During the peak years of upheaval, 1877, 1886, and 1892–93, tens of thousands of strikes, involving hundreds of thousands of workers, occurred in a number of industries across the country.<sup>3</sup> Owners, employers, and their representatives in city, state, and federal governments called the strikes “insurrections,” linked them to the “Paris Commune,” and denounced the strikers as “anarchists,” “communists,” “Reds,” “foreign agitators,” and “bomb-throwers.” Meanwhile, urban newspapers and magazines

depicted union workers as dark, unshaven men arriving from abroad, armed with swords, bombs, rifles, and cannon.<sup>4</sup> As Melville developed his narrative about what befell Billy Budd during the year of “the Great Mutiny,” he did so in a society anxious about violence, eager for order, and willing to use armed force to impose it. Did Melville concern himself with these issues? Does *Billy Budd* incorporate his response to them? This essay will suggest some provisional answers to these questions by looking at *Billy Budd* within the contexts of the 1880s and of Melville’s career. The thesis it will advance is that *Billy Budd* becomes a site – charged by contemporary events – for Melville to revisit and review the issues of democracy and authority, revolution and reform, violence and order, which had long concerned him, and to dramatize the value and cost of a conservative stance toward them.

## I

Despite the nostalgia that permeates *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), the contemporary strikes and riots that unsettled America surely caught Melville’s attention. Current events had always interested him, and in the last decades of his life, he had ample opportunity to follow them. He lived in the country’s largest city; he read its papers; he walked its streets. From 1866 to 1885, he was a district inspector of customs in New York City, working first along the North River waterfront at 207 West Street, then at 62 Harrison Street (which was nearer his home at 104 East 26th Street), and finally at 76th Street and the East River. As he began *Billy Budd* early in 1886 by writing the prose headnote to the ballad “Billy in the Darbies,” labor unrest broke out near at hand. In March 1886 the city was disrupted by a series of violent street car strikes, which lead to massive police action against the strikers (see Figure 1.1). During the first week of March, New York



Figure 1 T. De Thulstrup, *The Street Railroad Strike in New York – The Police Opening the Way for a Horsecar.*

horse-car drivers and conductors tied up every major road in the city, from the Battery to East 34th Street. After attempts to run a car through Grand Street failed when strikers blocked the tracks with lumber, bricks, barrels, and cobble-stones, city officials called out the police and 750 of them escorted the same car along its route, encountering opposition from workers and their sympathizers. At Eldrige Street, when a baggage truck was overturned to block the way, the police charged the crowd, and according to one report, "With wild cries of alarm the crowd scattered in all directions, a few badly clubbed, some injured by being trampled upon, while show windows were smashed, and hats and bonnets were strewn on the street as the result of the fray."<sup>5</sup> The striking drivers and the railroad company reached an agreement the following day, yet the "labor agitation," as it was called, persisted in the months that followed.

On May 4, 1886, a more deadly and explosive confrontation between workers and police occurred in Chicago at Haymarket Square, which received widespread newspaper coverage and led to the most sensational trial of the decade. On May 3, strikers had fought with scabs at the McCormick Harvester Company, and the Chicago police fired on the strikers, killing four men and wounding many more. In protest, some 3,000 people gathered in Haymarket Square the next evening and listened to speeches condemning the police and their actions. As the crowd was breaking up, the police moved in with raised clubs. A dynamite bomb exploded in their midst, and they opened fire on the crowd. Six policemen were killed by the bomb, and some fifty were injured; several workers were killed by the police and at least 200 were wounded.<sup>6</sup> Public outrage and blame about this bloodshed were directed toward the anarchists who had spoken out on behalf of the strike. A widely circulated illustration in *Harper's Weekly* dramatized the



perceived ties between the anarchists and the violence (see Figure 1.2), as speaker and bomb mirror one another in the picture's horizontal composition.

After the bombing, the Chicago police raided meeting halls, printing offices, and private homes, arrested hundreds of workers, and charged eight leading anarchists with murder. Although no evidence linked them directly to the bombing, the eight men were accused of having incited the unknown bomb-thrower. A few prominent citizens, such as William Dean Howells, spoke out on their behalf, but public opinion ran strongly against them. The majority view was expressed by the owner of a Chicago clothing firm who declared, "No, I don't consider these people to have been found guilty of any offense, *but they must be hanged . . . the labor movement must be crushed!*"<sup>7</sup>

In the wake of the Haymarket bombing, New York and other cities witnessed judicial reaction. As Philip Foner has explained, "the Police and the courts were assigned an important role in the employers' counter-offensive; police activity was matched by judicial tyranny. Arrests and imprisonment of strikers and boycotters on the spurious charge of 'conspiracy' occurred all over the country".<sup>8</sup> An editorial in *Harper's Weekly* entitled "The Anarchists at Chicago" rationalized the contemporary legal severity by declaring, "Anarchists who justify and counsel murder as necessary to the overthrow of society, when murder begins in consequence of that incitement, cannot be held guiltless. . . . it is the welfare of society and the security of liberty under law which alone should determine the kind and degree of the penalty!"<sup>9</sup> With even less moderation, an editorial in the November 25 *New York Times* called the anarchists "a gang of villains" and "mad dogs," and then declared: "In such a case even Judges may be expected to be guided by a sense of stern justice, and to regard it as



Figure 2 T. De Thulstrup, *The Anarchist Riot in Chicago – A Dynamite Bomb Exploding Among the Police.*

desirable that the wretched brood should be exterminated.”<sup>10</sup> Amidst such hostility, the anarchists were found guilty, and seven were sentenced to death. Governor Oglesby commuted the sentences of two to life imprisonment; one committed suicide in his cell, and on November 11, 1887 four of them were hanged. “Law and order must be maintained when revolution threatens,” declared the author of an article entitled “The Lesson of Chicago.”<sup>11</sup> The unfairness of the trial did not dawn on most Americans until the twentieth century, and when Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld issued his famous pardon on June 26, 1893, declaring the defendants completely innocent victims of a biased judge and packed juries, he became one of the most reviled men in America.<sup>12</sup>

The issues of conspiracy, rebellion, armed force, and repression figure prominently in *Billy Budd*, of course, and seem clearly linked to the contemporary scene. “The similarities of historical moment—of mass unrest and challenges to authority, of issues brought to law and settled by authorized force—resound too insistently to be ignored,” as Alan Trachtenberg has pointed out.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, distinctive features of the Haymarket affair—the harsh justice, the scapegoating, the death by hanging—have persuaded several critics that this event served as a particular source for Melville’s narrative.<sup>14</sup> Like the Haymarket defendants, Billy is an innocent man hung to preserve order during a time of revolutionary strife. Whether like them he is also the victim of a biased judge and unfair trial, however, remains an open question.<sup>15</sup> Critical controversy has long surrounded Melville’s authority figure, Captain Vere.

On the one hand, one can argue that Vere prejudices the case against Billy, uses irregular proceedings to convict him, and then executes him in a gross miscarriage of justice. On the other, one can argue that Vere, though filled with compassion

for Billy, acts with a heroic presence of mind during a crisis, preserving the social order by an act of stern yet necessary justice. Milton Stern has been the most prominent advocate for this second view, and he has persuasively argued that “in *Billy Budd*, with many modifications and exceptions, with anger and depression, Melville is making a tortured choice for conservatism.”<sup>16</sup> Vere’s conservative rationale for hanging Billy, of course, is that it will silence and tame the sailors, who otherwise will take the captain’s inaction as a sign of weakness and an excuse to rebel. “You know what sailors are,” Vere says, in response to the Sailing Master’s suggestion of clemency. “Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Ay. They know the well-founded alarm – the panic it struck throughout England. Your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them – afraid of practising a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles.”<sup>17</sup> Although a number of critics have perceived irony at work here, Melville’s earlier treatments of revolutionary action suggest that he linked it with anarchy and bloodshed. In other words, he shared Vere’s conviction that “with mankind, forms, measured forms are everything” (128), and he applied this to disruptions at home and abroad throughout his life.

## II

Melville’s sociopolitical views were complex and at times self-contradictory, for they involved an “unconditional democracy” based on a faith in man in the ideal and a conservative elitism based on distrust for the mass of mankind.<sup>18</sup> Melville’s democracy figures prominently in *Billy Budd*, at times, especially in the portrayal of Billy as an ideal common sailor,

“an angel of God” (101), visually transfigured like Christ. Nevertheless, his conservatism also informs the novel, especially in the positive portrayal of Vere as a humane and rational captain struggling to do what is right in a world that is wrong. In many respects the novel dramatizes the dilemma posed in the famous “The Journey and the Pamphlet” chapter of *Pierre* (1852), where Melville elaborates upon the difficulties of reconciling celestial (chronometrical) time with terrestrial (horological) time – Heaven and Earth, the Ideal and the Actual. Does one execute a morally innocent man in order to secure the welfare of mankind? Only in a fallen world, Melville suggests, does such a question arise, yet we live in a fallen world.

Melville had served as a common sailor himself aboard five different ships during 1839–44, and in his early writings, *White-Jacket* (1850) especially, he vigorously affirms the inherent dignity and equality of the common sailors and castigates naval officers who abuse their authority and deny the sailors their basic human rights. Nevertheless, he also describes the depravity and ignorance of the “people,” and shows disdain toward them. He reserves his highest regard for grand and glowing individuals, such as Jack Chase, who possess superior social, moral, and intellectual gifts. In *Moby-Dick* (1851), the two sides of Melville’s sociopolitical thought come to the fore when Ishmael declares, “take high abstracted man alone; and he seems a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe. But . . . take mankind in mass, and for the most part, they seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates.”<sup>19</sup>

For Melville, the dark side of mankind in the mass surfaced most noticeably and frighteningly during riots, mutinies, rebellions, and revolutions. He had been fascinated by popular violence for many years, and like most of his countrymen, he reacted negatively to it, even when oppression and injustice

were clearly its cause. *Moby-Dick* can be read as his most emotional treatment of revolutionary action (the red flag of revolt signals Ahab's radicalism), while *Billy Budd* is his most sustained analysis of the difficulties inherent in suppressing such action. During his early career, scenes from the French Revolution of 1789 were fresh in his mind, thanks to stories heard in his youth, from his Uncle Thomas especially. The Revolution possessed for him and his contemporaries an immediacy and reality that have been lost in the twentieth century due to the passage of time. The French revolutions of 1848 and 1871 reawakened memories of the "Reign of Terror" and provided their own dramas of violence and bloodshed that Melville and other Americans found appalling.<sup>20</sup>

The political allegory he added to *Mardi* (1849) in response to the European revolutions of 1848 contains an explicit anticipation of the treatment of French and English radicalism in *Billy Budd*. When the Mardian travellers approach Franko (France) in the earlier work, they see a violent eruption accompanied by the din of warfare, showers of embers, and whirling blasts. "The fiery storm from Franko, kindled new flames in the distant valleys of Porpheero [Europe]," Melville writes, "while driven over from Verdanna came frantic shouts, and direful jubilees. Upon Dominora [England] a baleful glare was resting." Media, the king, cries, "See! how the flames blow over upon Dominora!" while the philosopher Babbalanja answers, "Yet the fires they kindle there are soon extinguished. No, no; Dominora ne'er can burn with Franko's fires; only those of her own kindling may consume her."<sup>21</sup> In *Billy Budd*, Melville reuses this fire imagery as he describes the Nore mutiny: "Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames" (54).

The distinction between “reasonable discontent” and “irrational combustion” made in both cases points to a key aspect of Melville’s sociopolitical thought. For him, practical grievances and reasonable discontent needed to be addressed through reform; when they burst into “irrational combustion” or revolution, his sympathy turned to antipathy. His support for reform never developed into support for revolution; rather, he urged readers to value existential reality over abstract principles when it came to the revolutionary trinity of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. In *Mardi*, Melville comments upon the Paris workers’ revolt of June 1849 by introducing a mysterious scroll that expresses a number of Burkean reflections on recent events. This scroll asserts, “Better, on all hands that peace should rule with a scepter, than the tribunes of the people should brandish their broadswords. Better be the subject of a king, upright and just; than a freeman in Franko, with the executioner’s ax at every corner” (527). Violence brings only harm the scroll maintains: although “great reforms, of a verity, be needed; nowhere are bloody revolutions required. Though it be the most certain of remedies, no prudent invalid opens his veins, to let out his disease with his life” (529). The travelers in *Mardi* accuse one another of being the scroll’s author, but Melville terms it “a Voice from the Gods” (523).

The Civil War, as observed, seemed a bloody revolution in the making to many Americans, and Melville offered conservative reflections upon it in his *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866). In several of his poems, he expresses a Vere-like commitment to form and law as he indicts the forces of rebellion. “Dupont’s Round Fight,” for example, which treats the battle fought at Port Royal Sound, South Carolina, on November 7, 1861, ends with the declaration:

The rebel at Port Royal felt  
 The Unity overawe,  
 And rued the spell. A type was here,  
 And victory of LAW.<sup>22</sup>

A comparable poem, "The House-Top," treats the New York Draft Riots of 1863 and reveals a similar conservative commitment to law and order. Here the masses give voice to "the Atheist roar of riot," and illuminate themselves by "red Arson," until the militia, "wise Draco," arrives and restores order. The thrust of the poem is that the author's countrymen are unaware of the challenge to democratic ideals implied in their approval of armed force to quell the riots:

. . . the Town, redeemed,  
 Give thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds  
 The grimy slur on the Republic's faith implied,  
 Which holds that Man is naturally good,  
 And – more – is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged.<sup>23</sup>

As Milton Stern has pointed out, "In 'The House-Top' what is clear is a dominant distrust of men, a sense of the limitations of fallen man, and a consequent need for formal imposition of law and order."<sup>24</sup>

Some thirteen years later in his long poem *Clarel* (1876), Melville responded in a similar vein to the recent French revolution of 1871, when the communists took over Paris for two months (establishing the Paris Commune), and thousands of people were killed before and after government troops regained the city. In the poem, he portrays the "Reds" as even more reprehensible than the French revolutionaries of 1789:

The Revolution, whose first mode,  
 Ere yet the maniacs overrode,  
 Despite the passion of the dream  
 Evinced no disrespect for God; . . .  
 But yesterday – how did they then,



In new uprising of the Red,  
 The offspring of those Tuileries men?  
 They made a clothes-stand of the Cross  
 Before the church; . . .  
 Transcended rebel angels.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the revolutionaries become like Lucifer's minions, angels who revolt against God and are cast into hell. This demonization of French revolutionaries is attributed to Ungar, the disillusioned Confederate soldier in *Clarel*, but it forms part of the overall political conservatism of the poem. As Walter E. Bezanson has pointed out, "A major political theme of *Clarel*" is "intense distrust of French revolutionary politics in the 19th century, and of radicalism generally."<sup>26</sup> Throughout *Clarel*, a number of Melville's characters, including Rolfe, the Dominican, Mortmain, and Ungar, heap contempt upon the "Vitriolists," "Red Caps," "Communists," and "Atheists."

As he worked on *Billy Budd*, until shortly before his death in 1891, Melville returned to the 1789 Revolution in France, surely because of contemporary social unrest.<sup>27</sup> He addressed this unrest obliquely, however, reasserting his sense of the cyclical nature of human events and making his indictment of radicalism transhistorical and sweeping. The "Great Mutiny," we are told, was precipitated by revolution in France, yet it resembled "what a strike in the fire-brigade would be to London threatened by general arson" (54). Melville thus links mutiny, revolution, strikes, and arson through their common destructiveness. The special urgency of the situation on the *Bellipotent* arises because Billy's killing of Claggart occurs during wartime, at a time when the future of the Western world depends upon Vere's ability to maintain control of his ship. As the narrator explains, "The year 1797, the year of this narrative, belongs to a period which, as every thinker now feels, involved a crisis for Christendom not exceeded in its undetermined

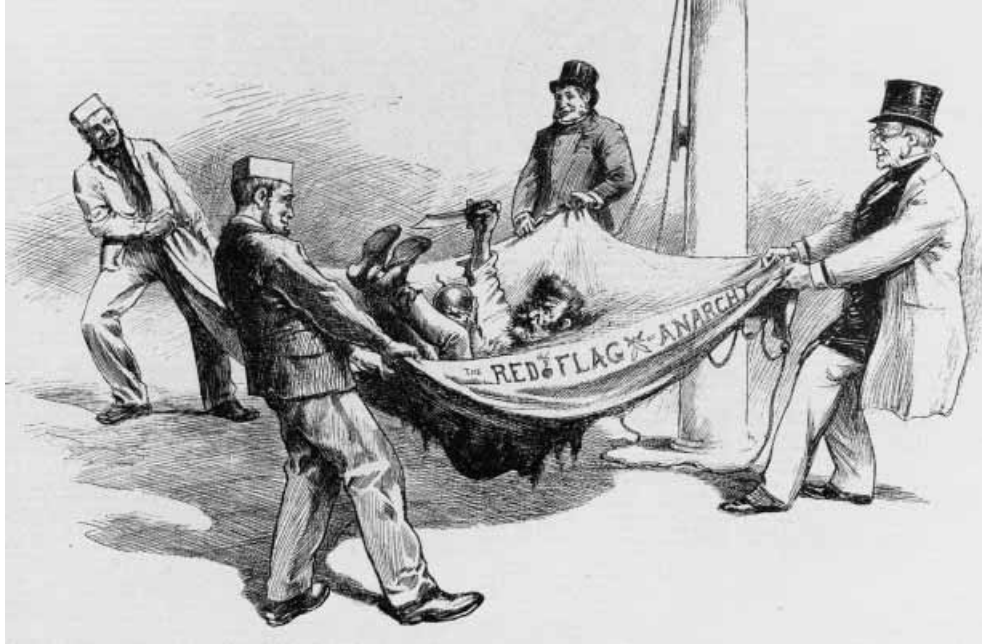


Figure 3 W. A. Rogers, *The Latest Chicago Idea: Tossing the Anarchist in His Own Blanket – The Red Flag.*

momentousness at the time by any other era whereof there is record.”<sup>28</sup> The “crisis” provides the justification for, and clarifies the stakes involved in, Vere’s stern justice.

In the early drafts of *Billy Budd*, one can see Melville’s strong antipathy toward the French Revolution of 1789, as he stresses its violence and bloodshed. In subsequent drafts, perhaps in an effort to emphasize Vere’s solidity and reason, he tones down the narrative’s extremism and adds weight to its conservative thrust. For example, in the first account of Vere’s opposition to French thought, Melville writes that the “new-fangled” ideas from abroad so far partook “of the unsound as to border on the insane.” He later revised this to read “at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind.”<sup>29</sup> French radicalism thus becomes a momentous social danger rather than a temporary psychotic state. The red flag, associated with anarchy in contemporary America, as well as revolution in France, received attention in the contemporary press and became another image Melville altered as he worked on his text. When *Harper’s Weekly* applauded Chicago election results in the spring of 1887, it used a cartoon by W. A. Rogers showing an anarchist being tossed in a ragged red flag (see Figure 1.3). Melville’s first description of the transformation of the British flag by the mutineers at the Spithead and the Nore, likewise treats the red flag contemptuously, as it details how the sailors wiped out the union and the cross and thereby transmuted their flag into the enemy’s “red rag of revolt and universal revolution.” Melville later changed this to “red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt,”<sup>30</sup> thereby granting the red flag more consequence and power.

The British colors at the time had no cross to be wiped out, as Stanton Garner has shown,<sup>31</sup> yet the historical inaccuracy allows Melville to suggest symbolically the anti-Christian and atheistical dimensions of revolution, as he had done previously

in *Moby-Dick* and *Clarel*, where he alluded to the French revolutions of 1848 and 1871 respectively. In *Moby-Dick*, the red flag of revolt flying on the mast-head of the *Pequod* is linked symbolically not only to Ahab's mad rebellion against God, but also to the recent "Bloody June Days" in Paris, when workers, shouting communist slogans, clashed with government troops. The tableau at the end of the novel, with its vivid conjunction of the red flag, the red arm, the hammer, the sinking ship, and the imminent descent to Hell, reflects both Melville's conservatism and contemporary attitudes toward European "Red Republicanism," which frightened Americans at mid-century.<sup>32</sup> Viewed in the context of Melville's earlier treatments, Captain Vere's death in *Billy Budd*, the result of a musket-ball fired from the French man-of-war, the *Atheé*, the Atheist, can be seen as Melville's last and most dramatic example of the murderous nature of French radicalism.

### III

Melville's antipathy toward revolutionary action, his appreciation for law and order, flowed from a number of sources, many of them biographical. The French Revolution of 1789 was linked in his memory with the reversals of fortune of his father, his uncle Thomas, and especially himself, and it formed the basis for his latent antipathy; the French Revolution of 1848 inspired him to express this antipathy in his works, *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, especially; and the revolution of 1871 intensified what he already felt and believed. Violence appalled him, and he had little faith that political uprisings, even when they led to new forms of government, brought lasting benefits. One of his deepest convictions was that "'All is Vanity.' ALL," a quotation from Ecclesiastes, which he called the "fine hammered steel of woe."<sup>33</sup> In his view, revolutions merely

resulted in one oppressor replacing another in an endless chain of oppositions. In *Mardi*, the mysterious scroll declares that “though crimson republics may rise in constellations, like fiery Aldebarans, speeding to their culminations; yet, down must they sink at last, and leave the old sultan-sun in the sky; in time, again to be deposed” (527). In “Benito Cereno,” Melville uses masked images on the stern-piece – “a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked”<sup>34</sup> – to suggest that revolt, such as that on the *San Dominick*, makes victim and victimizer indistinguishable and interchangeable. In *Clarel*, Rolfe reflects on the European revolutions of 1848, writing:

The flood weaves out – the ebb  
Weaves back; the incessant shuttle shifts  
And flies, and wears and tears the web.  
Turn, turn thee to the proof that sifts:  
  
What if the kings in Forty-Eight  
Fled like the gods? even as the gods  
Shall do, return they made; and sate  
And fortified their strong abodes.<sup>35</sup>

The poem thus alludes to the failures of the revolutions of 1848 and the reinstatement of new absolutist governments in almost all the countries in which revolutions occurred. In *Billy Budd*, Melville reasserts this fatalistic view of revolution, as he historicizes his narrative: “The opening proposition made by the Spirit of that Age,” he writes, “involved the rectification of the Old World’s hereditary wrongs. In France, to some extent, this was bloodily effected. But what then? Straightaway the Revolution regency as righter of wrongs itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the Kings. Under Napoleon it enthroned upstart kings, and initiated that prolonged agony of Continental war whose final throes was at Waterloo.”<sup>36</sup>

Despite this fatalistic attitude toward political change, tied to his pessimistic view of mankind, Melville in his later life evidenced a Vere-like sense of duty that sustained him. As Stanton Garner has shown, the New York Custom House, where Melville worked for nineteen years until 1885, was “a genuinely malign instrument of corruption.” “Out of its continual round of politics and ruthless manipulation, as well as its demand for obsequious compliance, he was forced to salvage as best he could the self-respect and dignity which were the defenses of his old age.”<sup>37</sup> When Melville began his service, he wore a badge on the outside of his coat, and beginning early in 1878 he and the other inspectors wore Navy-like uniforms modeled on those of the Revenue Cutter Service.<sup>38</sup> When Vere tells his drum-head court that the buttons on their uniforms attest that their allegiance is to the King, not to Nature, he expresses a sense of duty that Melville evidenced in his own service to the state. In 1873 his brother-in-law John C. Hoadley thus described Melville’s conduct: “surrounded by low venality, he puts it all quietly aside, – quietly declining offers of money for special services, – quietly returning money which has been thrust into his pockets behind his back, avoiding offence alike to the corrupting merchants and their clerks and runners, who think that all men can be bought, and to the corrupt swarms who shamelessly seek their price.”<sup>39</sup> On points of honor, Melville was obstinate, and despite his explorations of cultural relativism and epistemological uncertainty, much of his thought rested upon a foundation of ethical certainty. At the heart of Melville’s great work, *Moby-Dick*, lies an obsession with justice, and Ahab’s quarrel with the god or gods who allow the faithful and innocent to suffer can be read as an insistence that life should resemble a boxing match where strict rules apply. *Billy Budd* marks Melville’s final exploration of this topic and offers the insight that justice itself can cause the

faithful and innocent to suffer. It should be added, though, that Billy's violent streak and his failure to report a mutiny in the making call into question his putative innocence.

In his interactions with members of his family, especially his sons, Melville displayed a firmness much like Vere's, which set him apart. Vere, we are told, "though a conscientious disciplinarian, . . . was no lover of authority for mere authority's sake" (104), and one suspects Melville thought of himself in the same way. As Merton Sealts has pointed out, Melville "was a strict disciplinarian, given to moodiness and irascibility that some of his relatives by marriage came to interpret as outright insanity."<sup>40</sup> In his dealings with his own children, he seems to have been inflexible, and circumstantial evidence suggests that the suicide of his son Malcolm in 1867 may have been precipitated by Melville's harsh discipline. Hennig Cohen and Donald Yannella have posited that "For Malcolm, caught between a kindly though inept mother and a domineering father and trapped within an atmosphere of matrimonial tension, there was no substitute for pistol and ball."<sup>41</sup> Though one hesitates to accept this assertion, knowledge of Melville's troubled relations with Malcolm accentuates the poignancy of the last embrace between Billy and Vere, which remains veiled from our eyes. Melville writes of the scene, "two of great Nature's nobler order embrace. There is privacy at the time, inviolable to the survivor; and holy oblivion, the sequel to each diviner magnanimity, providentially covers all at last" (115). If Melville's treatment of Vere draws upon the author's own experiences, then Billy's forgiveness of Vere should perhaps be read as a father's wishful fantasy about hearing his dead son speak.

The fact that Vere and Billy are portrayed as exceptional men gives us additional reason to view them in the context of Melville's life and career. Vere's rigidity as well as Billy's

goodness are Christlike within Melville's sociopolitical system of values. Sometime after receiving a copy of *New Testament & Psalms* as a gift in 1846, Melville copied and underscored the following description of Christ into the book:

In Life he appears as a true Philosopher – as a wise man in the highest sense. He stands *firm to his point*; he *goes on his way inflexibly*; and while he exalts the lower to himself, while he makes the ignorant, the poor, the sick, partakers of his wisdom, of his riches, of his strength, he, on the other hand, in no wise conceals his divine origin; he dares to equal himself with God; nay to declare that he himself is God.

In this manner is he wont from youth upwards to *astonish his familiar friends*; of these he gains a part to his own cause; irritates the rest against him; and shows to all men, who are aiming at a certain elevation in doctrine and life, *what they have to look for from the world*.<sup>42</sup>

This interpretation of the character and life of Christ not only captures Melville's sense of his own "inflexibility," but also illuminates his admiration for Vere's firmness. Near the end of his life, as he was revising *Billy Budd*, Melville marked several book passages that reveal his continued fascination with the superior individual. In Balzac's *Fame and Sorrow* he scored a passage describing "the horrible strife, the incessant warfare which mediocrity wages against superior men," and in Schopenhauer's *Studies in Pessimism*, he scored, "... if he is a man of genius, he will occasionally feel like some noble prisoner of state, condemned to work in the galleys with common criminals; and he will follow his example and try to isolate himself."<sup>43</sup> These passages help us understand Melville's conception of himself, of Vere, and perhaps even of Billy.

Of all the qualities linking Vere and Billy to one another, the noble blood flowing in their veins is the most telling, and it sets them apart from the turbulent masses. Despite his democracy,