WILLIAM BARTLEY

'Measured Forms' and Orphic Eloquence: The Style of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*

> Come hither, broken hearted; here is another life without the guilt of intermediate death; here are wonders supernatural, without dying for them. Come hither! bury thyself in a life, which to your equally abhorred and abhorring landed world, is more oblivious than death. Come hither! put up *thy* gravestone, too, within the churchyard, and come hither, till we marry thee! (*Moby-Dick*)

> Not magnitude, not lavishness,
> But Form – the Site;
> Not innovating wilfulness,
> But reverence for the Archetype. ('Greek Architecture')

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* is notorious for the disagreement over what Melville's intentions are in this story, and a corresponding disagreement over what the basis of critical judgment should be. The disagreement is so utterly polarized that, in fact, it is difficult to believe that the opposing sides have read the same work. And yet the very fact that the disagreement is polarized, and consequently, intense, serves as a kind of provocation for us to seek a way of adjusting such radically opposed positions with each other, on the hunch that each view is a response to something *there* in the story, and that the adjustment is made by Melville himself. We will discover that there is something to this hunch when we examine the style, inasmuch as style is both an instrument of perception and judgment, and the embodiment of an active intelligence.

The dispute is pretty clear cut, so, although it will be necessary to rehearse the broad outlines of this disagreement as a preparation for the main business of this paper, it can be done briefly. One group of readers simply cannot *believe* that Melville could have endorsed Captain Vere's sacrifice of Billy Budd to the shallow ends of a political order devoid of natural justice, a political order that regards natural justice as a dangerous fiction. Indeed, Melville appears to take a position that is so outrageous that no reasonable man could hold it seriously; certainly no American could, and certainly not Melville – the author of *White-Jacket*, a son of the Revolution, and the grandson of the Hero of Bunker Hill – who, accordingly, so the traditional argument runs, has signalled his ironic

judgment of Vere as surely as Swift does of the projector in 'A Modest Proposal.' This is perhaps a crude way of characterizing the response of the 'ironists' (a term which is still useful, in spite of the sophisticated, ingenious, and energetically proliferating refinements of this position) to the counter-argument that *Billy Budd* is Melville's final 'testament of acceptance,' or 'recognition of necessity' – an old man's dignified gesture of 'quiet conservatism.'[1]

The sort of adjustment that I have in mind does not favour the ironist view, which, I would suggest, is almost certainly wrong. But readers of *Billy Budd* need to credit the very good reasons that account for its persistence, and to account for the emotional stridency – 'Is not this piercing irony? ... does not the reader gag?' asks Joseph Schiffman in response to Budd's execution – with which the view is articulated. We don't gag, but the fact that readers have consistently taken this tone suggests that the motivation for it is *there* in the story, and that the occasional shrillness of these readers is an understandable, if finally sentimental, response to the correspondingly sentimental complacency of the 'testament' view; among these latter readers, there is much talk of acceptance and of submission to authority, but one can't help feeling that acceptance and submission are rather too easily given, with the sacrifice involved rather too readily slighted and obscured.

That acceptance and submission are necessary seems clear. In a time of war and national emergency, Billy Budd, the most purely innocent of men, is victimized by Claggart, the most purely malicious, and strikes him in an act of pure natural justice, killing him accidentally with the blow; and yet he is executed in accordance with the most purely authoritarian and unjust of laws – the Mutiny Act – a law which rigorously excludes any consideration of equity. The law is administered by Vere, who surrenders his almost paternal and protective love for a morally helpless innocent in favour of a deeply felt allegiance to order and its enabling forms and usages, an order which is threatened from without by the French Directory and from within by the violent and ideologically motivated mutinies at the Nore and Spithead. Because the mutinies are still fresh in the memories of both officers and crew, any sign of hesitancy in applying the letter of the law would, the captain reasons, be construed by the crew as a sign of weakness, a weakness they would likely take advantage of. And yet, what else can we do but recoil from the slaughter of innocence? How can we fail to acknowledge the strength of feeling aroused by the action – a feeling that passes over, if one is not wary, from grief to indignation? Still, Melville doesn't mean to let us pass over; he wants us to be wary of it, just as he wants us to acknowledge its intractable pressure, even as he comes very close to inducing its release. The point is that Melville by no means permits an easy acquiescence to the law. The moral centre of the story – the conviction that the rule of law is a

condition of civilization and is prior to justice and mercy – is held at extraordinary cost and against the almost irrestible pull of sympathetic feeling for Budd.

This is a judgment based on close attention to style, the process of attending to minute details of language and of noting how these details accumulate and build into larger units of structure, into a broader movement – so that 'style' may appear to encroach upon 'form' or 'structure.' The distinction is rendered a useful but misleading fiction, which sometimes proves clumsy when we are trying to describe the movement of a body in terms of its minute gestures but finding it difficult to dissociate them from complicity in the overall trajectory of movement. That process of attention I hope to reconstruct here because it proves to be particularly rewarding: we become aware of the activity of a sensitively discriminating and inclusive intelligence given body in a style; we become aware of how this style is completely cognizant of the power and attractiveness of the allegiance we are meant to feel for Budd and, by implication, natural justice, and yet controls and judges this feeling. The process begins with looking at a passage that is absolutely crucial to getting at Melville's intentions, and with rescuing it from the energetic misappropriation of the ironists. This is the well-known 'measured forms' passage, in which Captain Vere justifies his commitment to the forms and usages of military procedure and to the rule of law – as represented by the brutal instrument of the Mutiny Act:

> 'With mankind,' he would say, 'forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood.' And this he once applied to the disruption of forms going on across the Channel and the consequences thereof.[2]

For most readers, Vere's position is repudiated by Melville's remarks, in the chapter that immediately follows, on the kind of form that is adequate to the truth, and which appear to justify the notoriously loose and digressive structure of the tale. He says:

> The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot be so readily 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. (128)

For example, Marlene Longenecker, who is a representative spokesman, points out that 'measured form as a description of civilized order and ragged form as an uncompromised truth are offered as unreconciled alternatives.' This exposes Vere's position as 'inadequate by its very exclusivity.'[3] His unbending trust in 'measured forms' cripples his ability

to accommodate or even countenance the ragged edges of truth. Equally incriminating is Vere's 'typological identification with Orpheus as a lawmaker, not as an artist,' which, for Longenecker, is 'in the largest sense a failure of the imagination,' a perversion, as Eric Mottram adds, of 'the Orphic myth itself into a political myth of control.'[4]

Nevertheless, this argument distorts the nature of the very deep connection between Vere's statement and the action and style of the tale. One source of distortion is the false equation of 'symmetry of form' with 'measured form'; another is the false distinction between 'lawmaker' and 'poet,' for the Orphic myth, at least in one important tradition, equates the two vocations. So, I shall argue, does Vere, and so does Melville. The consequences of clarifying this connection in this light are drastic: we see that 'measured form' precisely characterizes both Vere's actions and Melville's creative apprehension of them in his style. The result is that we are pulled by the story, however reluctantly, towards the disquieting perception that 'measured forms' are, indeed, 'everything with mankind' –disquieting because we are made to feel the efficacy and legitimacy of 'measured form.' 'Disquieting' is perhaps not the right word. As Allan Tate has observed of some writers – and we ought to think of Melville in this way – 'we have got to take them as they come, and they often come a little rough.'[5] The sense of roughness is one kind of response appropriate to the perception of intellectual honesty, of an integrity and fortitude of attention that, in turn, yields some of the greatest prose one is likely to encounter in nineteenth-century American fiction.

To take Melville as he comes in *Billy Budd* is to discover, among other things, that the Orpheus present in the tale is not the Orpheus of the syncretic and Neoplatonic traditions, the Orpheus appropriated by Emerson and other Transcendentalists, in which, indeed, the lawmaker *is* opposed to the poet.[6] Rather, it is the Orpheus of a competing and equally continuous tradition, the Orpheus who represents the ideal of eloquence in the service of civil order. Orpheus's power of speech is represented as having the capacity to restore order and harmony in the commonwealth, and authority for this view is secured either by analogy to Orpheus's ability to tame wild animals or to his pacification of the Argonauts. Horace, in *Ars Poetica*, is an ancient spokesman of the high public purpose of Orpheus, and the acclaim due to him:

> When primitive men roamed the forests,
> Orpheus, the sacred interpreter of heavenly will,
> Turned them away from killing and living like beasts
> And hence is said to have tamed wild lions and tigers.
> ... This was the wisdom of former times: to distinguish
> Public from private concerns and sacred from common,
> To build towns and carve out the laws on pillars of wood.[7]

Boccaccio picks up this thread and develops it:

> With [his lyre] Orpheus moves woods whose powerful roots are imbedded in the earth, which represent obstinate opinionated men who can be moved from their stubborness only by the powers of eloquence. He arrests the flow of rivers, that is, unstable and lustful men who are destined to flow into the sea of unending bitterness unless the powerful pronouncements [*demonstrationibus*] of eloquence confirm them in manly virtue. He tames fierce animals, that is, bloodthirsty men, who can often be restored to mildness and humanity only by some wise man's eloquence.[8]

So too with Natalis Comes, who, in scornful judgment of the poets of his own day, raises the standard of Orpheus, asserting that the human community depends on the great poet:

> For that race of ancient poets knew everything, quite unlike those of our own day who think the whole art of poetry to consist merely of verbal quantities and metric; or who babble away to flatter some important man, hoping to snap up some trivial gift that might pop into his mind. The songs of the ancient poets, on the other hand, were revered like the holiest laws. Cities quarrelling over something would commonly take a poet's song as a sentence of the weightiest judgement. In fact, Orpheus' great power of speech was said to be such that, when men were panic-stricken and through some great disaster fallen into despair, he would restore them to their original state and bring their minds peace. The man who could do things like this is the kind of man the rest of society must acknowledge as a superior, rather than the man who lives only for himself, surrounded by his amassed wealth, selfishly enjoying the fruits of his wisdom which remain just as useless to the rest of mankind as if he had never been born.[9]

In keeping with this, Edmund Spenser conceives of Orpheus, in *The Faerie Queene*, as the maker of Concord on board the Argo: 'Such as was *Orpheus*, that when strife was growen / Amongst those famous ympes of Greece, did take / His silver Harpe in hand, and shortly friends them make.'[10]

And the tradition is not lost in the nineteenth century, for we find Thomas Carlyle speaking of the civilizing efficacy of Orpheus in *Sartor Resartus*:

> Was it not the still higher Orpheus, or Orpheuses, who, in past centuries, by the divine Music of Wisdom, succeeded in civilizing Man? ... Not only was Thebes built by the music of an Orpheus; but without the music of some inspired Orpheus was no city ever built, no work that man glories in ever done.[11]

August Wilhelm Schlegel, echoing Horace and Comes, reminds us that 'the oldest lawgivers delivered their mandatory instructions and prescriptions in measured melodies,' as 'is fabulously ascribed to Orpheus, the first softener of the as yet untamed race of mortals.' He goes on to characterize the nature of classical poetry generally: 'in like manner the whole of the ancient poetry and art is, as it were, a *rhythmical nomos* (law), an harmonious promulgation of the permanently established legislation of a world submitted to a beautiful order.'[12]

More significantly, in an interesting application of the myth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge tells, in *The Friend*, of a heroic captain of a man-of-war, Sir Alexander Ball, who inherited a mutinous crew, several of whom had been impressed into service. They were a hard-bitten lot, but the captain miraculously subdued their 'furious spirit' by imposing a system of discipline 'as near as possible to that of ordinary law' and 'as much as possible, he avoided, in his own person, the appearance of any will or arbitrary power to vary or remit punishment.'[13] For Coleridge, the explanation for the captain's success lies in the '*invisible*,' 'irresistible,' and 'aweful power of LAW, acting on natures pre-configured to its influences,'[14] a suasive power that he himself cannot resist:

> *for me* its power is the same with that of my own permanent Self, and that all the choice, which is permitted to me, consists in my having it as my Guardian Angel or my avenging Fiend! This is the Spirit of LAW! The Lute of Amphion, the Harp of Orpheus! This is the true necessity, which compels man into the social state, now and always, by a still-beginning, never-ceasing force of moral cohesion.[15]

And it is Captain Ball, with 'heroism,' aided by his characteristic 'calmness and foresight,' who plays on this harp.

These precedents, indeed, alert us as to how Melville appears to have conceived the action of *Billy Budd*. Captain Vere, faced with the fact that the mutinies are still fresh in the memories of both officers and crew, and that several of his men have been impressed into service, is similarly anxious to maintain consistency and predictability in both law and procedure. Not that there is, however, any uncertainty over what Vere will choose to do and what principle will emerge as his guide, for his awareness of what must be done, along with the cost of doing it, is virtually immediate. When, for example, the ship's surgeon confirms that Claggart is dead, Vere, with no hint of pre-emptive judgment but, rather, with a professional and intuitive grasp of the situation, exclaims that Claggart has been 'struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!' (101). The uncertainty, instead, is most intensely apparent in the uncertainty, given Vere's decisiveness, over whether or not the order on board ship can survive the execution of Budd, for if the risk to order

would be great if Vere were to defer action – this is a given of the plot – it would be as great, if not greater, if the laws were to be applied.[16]

Nevertheless, Vere, with extraordinary tact, in every way can be said to *orchestrate* the peace, like the Orphic poet. His actions are eloquent in the historically conventional extension of eloquence to action, and this eloquent orchestration is delicately and exquisitely brought to life in Melville's style.[17] This is to perceive one sense of 'measured' activated in the tale – that is, according to the *OED*, 'having a rhythmic structure as concerned with the division into measures consisting of a uniform number of beats and time units.' Moreover, 'measured form' is not in any sense as exclusive or as limiting as 'symmetry of form.' 'Measured form,' on the face of it, is the very essence of sensitive inclusiveness, within necessary constraints, without which 'inclusiveness' would have no meaning. But this, after all, would be the nature of form that is measured, for another and commensurate sense of 'measured' relevant in the tale is 'to an extent or degree not excessive,' of due limitation, neither beyond nor without measure.

To confirm this, we need to make note, as we reach the critical stage of the action beginning in chapter 18, of the considerable attention Melville pays in the narration to the forms of military decorum. The chapter opens with an account of the *Bellipotent*'s brief engagement with a French frigate – the only military engagement the *Bellipotent* is involved in – and it is after this engagement that Claggart takes the well-timed opportunity to approach the captain with his accusation:

> the master-at-arms, ascending from his cavernous sphere, made his appearance cap in hand by the mainmast respectfully waiting the notice of Captain Vere, then solitary walking the weather side of the quarter-deck, doubtless somewhat chafed at the failure of the pursuit. The spot where Claggart stood was the place allotted to men of lesser grades seeking some more particular interview either with the officer of the deck or the captain himself. But from the latter it was not often that a sailor or a petty officer of those days would seek a hearing; only some exceptional cause would, according to established custom, have warranted that. (91)

Such particular observations of the manners and customs of sailors recall the quasi-anthropological and sociological documentation of Melville's earlier sailing narratives, particularly *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. The minute attention to degree and place – the captain, for example, taking his place on the quarter-deck, on the weather side of the ship, and Claggart standing in the *allotted* place below, by the mainmast – reminds us, of course, that life on board a man-of-war is highly structured and rigorously patterned. However, as we eventually discover in *Billy Budd*, these customs and manners are deeply implicated in the action of the

story in such a way that *Billy Budd* is, in a radical sense, a novel of manners. These manners and customs constitute the available forms of action, forms that give shape and significance to the conduct of every man on board. But also, by implication, they are the ground for the precise evaluation of conduct and, moreover, are taken for granted as such. Because military decorum is so highly structured and patterned, the slightest trace of the unusual or novel is set off with sharp definition. Moreover, the sheer particularity and minuteness of observation and detail, in both the passage I have just quoted and throughout the rest of this stretch of the tale, is especially justified. For it provides an emphatic sense of everything *in place* that is in direct proportion to the immediacy of the threat of insurrection. It represents an intensification of concentration and attentiveness, a tightening of the grip, and yet not a bracing – in all events, an adjustment of style – which is a due response to the fact that the continuing stability of these manners and customs as the forms of order and coherence upon which the safety of the ship ultimately depends can no longer, under the circumstances, be taken for granted.

This vulnerable order is challenged with Claggart's death at the hands of Budd in the privacy of Vere's cabin. And yet Vere responds to it with the proportionately firm insistence on the customary forms.[18] Thus, after he has recovered sufficiently from the initial shock of the event, he convenes a drumhead court with an attendant and quickened attention to 'usage.' He is convinced that, unless he moves promptly, the news of Claggart's death might 'tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew.' He is accordingly 'glad it would not be at variance with usage to turn the matter over to a summary court of his own officers' (104). Vere's emphasis on 'usage' here is on its character as the predictable, because customary, form of response to any circumstance and is of particular concern to Vere because, as such, it is a guarantee against the arbitrary and capricious exercise of power. As with Captain Ball, it is especially relevant as a check against arbitrarily varying the punishment required by the Mutiny Act – against, that is, arbitrary clemency. This is the impulse that Vere detects in the other members of the drumhead court, and he successfully persuades them not to submit to this potentially overwhelming temptation – keeping in mind that they are asked to superintend the slaughter of the spiritually innocent – by appealing to their instincts as officers. It is simply too clear, as Vere argues, that if the court mitigates the penalty demanded by the law, if they appear 'afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded,' they face the possibility of a mutiny, of a reversion 'to the recent outbreak at the Nore' (112–13).

Indeed, 'practicing a lawful rigor' requires the exact, rigorous, and repeated definition of their roles as officers that military decorum provides and announces. For Vere, this means a repeated assertion and

rehearsal, down to the most minute of details, of his role as commander, as we see, for example, at the beginning of Budd's trial:

> All being quickly in readiness, Billy Budd was arraigned, Captain Vere necessarily appearing as the sole witness in the case, and as such 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. (105)

However, granted that Vere is firm, he is nevertheless firm without tenacity. His problem is to avoid the stiff insensitivity and, thus, the fragility of the martinet, but not so much as to abandon legal principle and procedure, in circumstances where the middle ground between these alternatives is difficult to define. He lays down a foundation for carefully calculated, tactful, and *measured* departures from usage as the practical means of acknowledging, anticipating, and accommodating the latent explosiveness of the crew.

That Vere makes such departures is apparent from the moment Claggart accuses Billy on the quarter-deck, where Vere cautiously moves to keep Claggart's accusation from the attention of the crew. The trial itself is conducted *in camera* where it is, according to some authorities, customary to hold it in public.[19] The most important reason for this departure is, like the first, to avoid provocative publicity. But, in addition, because the prolonged absence of Budd and Claggart is finally sufficient to 'awaken speculations among no few of the ship's company as to what it was that could be detaining' them in Vere's cabin, Vere's secretiveness has the salutary effect of preparing the crew for what would otherwise be a shocking and potentially disruptive revelation. We can see this when the announcement of Claggart's death and Budd's fate is finally made:

> When, therefore, in weather not at all tempestuous, all hands were called in the second dogwatch, a summons under such circumstances not usual in those hours, the crew were not wholly unprepared for some announcement extraordinary, one having connection too with the continued absence of the two men from their wonted haunts. (116)

The announcement, that is, is made by means of a departure from usage that absorbs the extraordinary within a cushioning predictability that Vere maintains through his cautious handling of the affair. This, in turn, is complemented by other similarly tactful measures designed to ensure against shocking or alarming the men by providing them with an opportunity to absorb the impact of the news. For example, Budd is finally convicted and sentenced to hang by the court, but in the 'early morning watch, it being now night,' when in fact it is customary in such

cases, as Melville notes, for the sentence to be carried out immediately, without appeal (114).

Another important purpose served by the *in camera* proceeding is that it permits Vere the time and the privacy necessary to ensure the court's support – which, of course, is not immediately forthcoming – for the necessary guilty verdict before the matter is made public. In order to effect this support, he appoints the captain of the marines to the court. In doing so, 'the commander perhaps deviated from the general custom.' But this is justifiable because Vere feels that the marine officer is judicious and thoughtful. In convening the court, moreover, Vere reserves the right of 'formally or informally interposing at need' and, indeed, he does interpose informally with his attempts to persuade the court of the necessity of arriving at a guilty verdict and of imposing the prescribed penalty. And because of his strenuous efforts to guide the reluctant court to a satisfactory decision, he observes, correctly enough, that 'strangely we prolong proceedings that should be summary' in the face of the dangerous possibility that 'the enemy may be sighted and engagement result' (112) – a real danger given the recent encounter with the French frigate.

Now we are in a position to see what happens when this same quality of intelligent and measured discretion is confronted by the even more trying sequence of events that follows the trial. We become especially conscious of the rhythmic character of measured form. The sequence begins when Melville records Vere's responsively and tactfully studied articulation of formal procedure, as he prepares to announce Billy's sentence. As already noted, all hands are called for the second dogwatch in circumstances 'not usual in those hours.' Melville then presents us with a very deliberately structured tableau. 'On either side of the quarter-deck the marine guard under arms was drawn up,' and Captain Vere, 'standing in his place surrounded by all the wardroom officers,' addresses the men. Vere carefully avoids using the term 'mutiny,' and tactfully refrains from lecturing the men about military discipline, 'thinking perhaps that under the existing circumstances in the navy the consequence of violating discipline should be made to speak for itself' (116–17). But we note that the threat to the order on board ship is no longer latent:

> Their captain's announcement was listened to by the throng of standing sailors in a dumbness like that of a seated congregation of believers in hell listening to the clergyman's announcement of his Calvinistic text.
>
> At the close, however, a confused murmur went up. It began to wax.

Even so, we see that the suddenness of the crew's outburst of shocked feeling is fully anticipated and met with a proportionately swift and precisely timed formal and ordering response:

> 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. (117)

The noticeably quickened pace of the prose – the clear sense of which is unfortunately lost in quotation – at this critical moment is an exact representation of this quick and urgent exchange of challenge and response and, by implication, is a register of how formal routine bends to a contrary pressure while, at the same time, subduing it. For this is, in fact, what happens. The crew's confused murmur, just as it begins to grow in strength, is pierced and deflated as the crew's attention is redirected back to the routine of running the ship.

Formal procedure, in Vere's hands, is thus capable of a variable pace, and yet it never loses its integrity as a single and continuous movement which, in the present emergency, has a crucial efficacy as the means of sifting, arranging, and gathering into itself the confused and unorganized feeling – the contrary and discordant movement – of the crew. Our sense of a measured pace is intensified, and we see it brought to life in the rehearsal of procedure itself. Once this particular critical moment passes, and after Claggart's body is prepared for burial, with a due concern for 'the *suitable* hour' at which Claggart is buried, with 'every honor *properly* belonging to his naval grade' (my italics), the whole movement of the action and the prose finally settles again into the ample, measured, and concentrated rehearsal and articulation of form:

> In this proceeding as in every public one growing out of the tragedy *strict adherence to usage* was observed. Nor in any point could it have been at all deviated from, either with respect to Claggart or Billy Budd, without begetting undesirable speculations in the ship's company, sailors, and more particularly men-of-war's men, being of all men the greatest *sticklers for usage*. For similar cause, all communication between Captain Vere and the condemned one ended, ... the latter being now surrendered to the *ordinary routine* preliminary to the end. His transfer under guard from the captain's quarters was effected *without unusual precautions* – at least no visible ones. If possible, not to let the men so much as surmise that their officers anticipate aught amiss from them is the *tacit rule* in a military ship. And the more that some sort of trouble should really be apprehended, the more do the officers keep that apprehension to themselves, though not the less *unostentatious vigilance* may be augmented. In the present instance, the sentry placed over the prisoner had *strict orders* to let no one have communication with him but the chaplain. And certain *unobtrusive measures* were taken absolutely to insure this point. (117–18; italics mine)

From this basis, we can move on to see how 'measured form' is defined on a larger scale and sustained through the deepening crisis on board

ship. The sense of measured division and pattern is established with the announcement of Claggart's death and Budd's sentence, a scene which, as we have noted, is very deliberately structured. The same order and structure of procedure is then brought forward and laid down during the execution scene. All hands are summoned again, at eight bells – again the time is specified – by the call of the boatswain's pipes. Vere, 'as before, the central figure among the assembled commissioned officers,' stands in his place, that is, 'nigh the break of the poop deck facing forward,' with the marines 'in full equipment' on the quarter-deck, just below the captain, 'drawn up much as at the scene of the promulgated sentence' (123). The sentence is executed, just as it was promulgated, according to form, including, of course, Budd's extraordinary but nonetheless conventional benediction of the captain the moment before he is hanged. And, as before, the crew, after a stunned silence, gives out a murmur, which, as it begins to 'wax into clamour,' is 'met by a strategic command,' this time coming with 'abrupt unexpectedness,' to the boatswain to pipe down the starboard watch. The men who remain on deck are kept busy, as in the aftermath of the announcement, with the routine business of running the ship, 'temporary employments connected with trimming the yards and so forth' (126).

Just as with the announcement and execution, so too with Budd's burial – the final public and official moment of the sequence. First, there is 'a second call to all hands,' to witness burial. This time there is no mention of the configuration of Vere, the officers, and the marines. Melville simply observes that 'the details of this closing it needs not give,' so that we may assume that Vere conducts this public ceremony in much the same way as before – just as we may also conclude that Melville is deliberately resisting a developing and simplifying symmetry in his presentation of this tableau. Again, the crew reacts, this time in response to the portentous circling of the seafowl over the spot where Budd's body has entered the water: 'An uncertain movement began among them, in which some encroachment was made.' This is met with, instead of the shrill whistles of the boatswain and his men, the drum beating to quarters, which, as a means equivalent to the whistles, has the effect of, again, dispersing the men. Melville points out that there is a 'signal peremptoriness' to this gesture and that mustering to quarters takes place 'an hour prior to the customary one' (127). Nevertheless, in spite of these deflections, this move succeeds in redirecting the men back to their business as sailors once again, though, significantly, not merely as sailors, for the drum beating to quarters is also an ultimate reminder that they are man-of-war's men and that their business is war. Appropriately, the crisis passes on this note as Melville minutely and rhythmically rehearses and asserts, with the same studied and intense concentration and in a way in which commentary merges with action, the formal gestures appropriate to the

occasion, and, no less important, their ever so slightly deflected status as custom:

> The drumbeat dissolved the multitude, distributing most of them along the batteries of the two covered gun decks. There, *as wonted*, the guns' crews stood by their respective cannon erect and silent. *In due course* the first officer, sword under arm and *standing in his place* on the quarter-deck, *formally received* the successive reports of the sworded lieutenants commanding the sections of batteries below; the last of which reports being made, the summed report he delivered with the *customary salute* to the commander. All this occupied time, which in the present case was the object in beating to quarters at an hour prior to the *customary* one. That such a *variance from usage* was authorized by an officer like Captain Vere, a martinet as some deemed him, was evidence of the necessity for *unusual* action implied in which he deemed to be temporarily the mood of the men. (127–8; italics mine)

And, again, with the same rhythmic consciousness of customary procedure, set off against carefully calculated variations of it:

> At this *unwonted* muster at quarters, all proceeded as at the *regular hour*. The band on the quarter-deck played a sacred air, after which the captain went through the *customary* morning service. That done, the drum beat the retreat; and toned by music and religious rites subserving the discipline and purpose of war, the men in their *wonted orderly manner* dispersed to *places allotted* them when not at the guns. (128; italics mine)

What is truly striking about the style of *Billy Budd* – and what should finally answer the charge that 'measured forms' lack 'inclusiveness' – is that the measured form Melville creates carries with it, or rather, enfolds within it and absorbs a thoroughly realized presence of anarchic feeling; and it is anarchic, even though it is a natural and even *due* response. Indeed, if we only sense that this feeling is there and gathering strength throughout the sequence of events that begins with Claggart's approach to Vere on the quarter-deck, it fully comes to life, as we might expect, during the execution scene. Here we get a direct sense of the massive and potentially destructive power of the mob:

> Suddenly *eight bells* was struck aft, responded to by one louder metallic stroke from forward. It was four o'clock in the morning. Instantly the silver whistles were heard summoning all hands to witness punishment. Up through the great hatchways rimmed with racks of heavy shot the watch below came pouring, overspreading with the watch already on deck the space between the mainmast and foremast. ... (122)

It should not be surprising that the author of *Moby-Dick* would conceive

this potency in terms of the moral lawlessness of the ocean – the 'immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored.'[20] It is the invasive and chaotic flood of the Old Testament, and not the dissolving and liberating flood promised by Transcendentalism, not only in its metaphysical but in its political manifestations as well.[21] We cannot help detecting in *Billy Budd* Melville's judgment of the Emersonian disposition to let the heavens fall – a strikingly energetic emotional and intellectual disposition that has deep roots in American, even English-speaking, religious and political life, for which Melville felt a very keen attraction, even as he judged it as a betrayal. For if this power is destructive, it – and *Moby-Dick* is relevant here too – is also alluring.

More tellingly, we feel this alluring power enacted in the style as the crew, in the immediate aftermath of the execution, works its way out of a protracted and shocked silence:

> The silence at the moment of execution and for a moment or two continuing thereafter, a silence but emphasized by the regular wash of the sea against the hull or the flutter of a sail caused by the helmsman's eyes being tempted astray, this emphasized silence was gradually disturbed by a sound not easily to be verbally rendered. (125–6)

The repetitive structure here suggests an expectant listening and hovering over the moment, just as it suggests an accumulating pressure of feeling working its way to the surface, fraught with explosive possibility. Then, Melville attempts to render verbally the quality of this sound, again resorting to water imagery:

> Whoever has heard the freshet-wave of a torrent suddenly swelled by pouring showers in tropical mountains, showers not shared by the plain; whoever has heard the first muffled murmur of its sloping advance through precipitous woods may form some conception of the sound now heard. The seeming remoteness of its source was because of its murmurous indistinctness, since it came from close by, even from the men massed on the ship's open deck. Being inarticulate, it was dubious in significance further than it seemed to indicate some capricious revulsion of thought or feeling such as mobs ashore are liable to, in the present instance possibly implying a sullen revocation on the men's part of their involuntary echoing of Billy's benediction. (126)

The seductive cadence of this passage, along with the light touches of sibilance scattered throughout it, registers the fact that the crew's response, however ominous, has an unmistakable and even inseparable quality of loveliness. Indeed, our perception of its beauty precedes our apprehension of its terrible potency.

The difficulties inherent in judging this attractive feeling are most apparent in Vere, whose 'settled convictions were as a dike against those

invading waters of novel opinion, social, political, and otherwise' (62) and yet who is perhaps most susceptible to these invading waters. This perhaps explains why his responses to the movements of the crew are so tactful; they have their basis in his sympathy for the crew's response to Budd, which is a quality we expect of both the lawgiver and the poet. The terrible beauty of incipient dissolution is plausibly as alluring to Vere when he stands 'unconsciously ... apparently in one of his absent fits – gazing out from a sashed porthole to windward upon the monotonous blank of the twilight sea' as it is for Ishmael atop the masthead, who feels drawn into 'the blending cadence of waves and thought.'[22] Here, the temptation to submit to the ominous ('till we *marry* thee') yet seductive call of the Sirens, who promise the kind of knowledge that frees one from the human condition, is extreme: 'Come hither! bury thyself in a life, which to your equally abhorred and abhorring landed world, is more oblivious than death.'[23]

The stress this temptation causes Vere is particularly evident during the execution scene itself, in his attempt to control his response to Budd's benediction: 'God Bless Captain Vere.' After the crew echoes Budd's words, 'Captain Vere, either through stoic self-control or a sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock, stood erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorer's rack' (123–4). This, indeed, is the just response to the necessary slaughter of a profoundly innocent man who, with perfect equanimity and selflessness, which if not strictly courageous is nevertheless pure and trusting, surrenders his own life in strict accordance to the law. Vere is standing at attention, which is, of course, the formal gesture appropriate to the occasion of a public execution, and which takes its place within the unfolding rhythmic movement of formal procedure. But it is more than a matter of mere military decorum, for a formal gesture is transformed into a means of controlling strong emotions – 'primitive instincts as strong as the wind and the sea' – and, accordingly, resonates with it, a resonance that deepens the movement as a whole. The fact that Vere stands 'erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorer's rack' makes clear that the precise means is a muscular response – a stiffening of the entire body in resistance to the opposing and almost overwhelming pressure of spontaneously sympathetic feeling aroused by the poignancy of Budd's benediction. If Melville shows a deliberate restraint in his commentary in determining whether or not Vere's rigidity is the correlative of a controlled pre-emption of feeling, it is because the alternative – a 'momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock' – is too difficult to distinguish from that pre-emption. For if shock involves the sudden collision of equally strong yet opposing and unreconciled allegiances – induced in this case by Budd's benediction – self control, to be possible here, would require facing and recovering from the same sort of collision. We have reached the point of maximum stress

where, as Melville suggests, control, if there is control, verges on the shocked limit of feeling itself. The difference, then, between shock and control is a difference of degree – a slight difference indeed since each is naturally resolved into the same gesture of standing erectly rigid. Vere's gesture, as such, is the appropriate register of his leaving his allegiance to duty and the 'measured forms' that give it form and activity open to the full force of the greatest of all possible challenges to their moral authority. It represents on Vere's part the courageous apprehension of the reality and legitimacy of both sides of the issue, along with the will to hold them together before him, without allowing his commitment to the one to distort or misrepresent – and thus undercut – the sympathetic attention due to the other.

But, finally, Vere's gesture is, for these reasons, the embodiment of the quality of attention to fact that is ultimately tragic. For the very reason that Vere is susceptible to the just sympathy that Budd's case demands, he can only evaluate it and assert his allegiance to duty by tightening his official, formal posture – a measured flex of his whole being – to the point where he presents himself as, and holds to, all that he can be under the circumstances. That is, Vere, through a kind of self-annihilation involving the abandonment of all selfish attitudes, becomes an unyielding and impersonal instrument of war, of pure Force in the defence of civilized order, as the figure of the musket in the rack also dictates. That Vere *might* have undergone the paralysis of shock suggests finally the tragic irrelevance of *his* willed assent to the execution of Budd.

This, then, is the pressure, both in its internal and external manifestations, that Vere's (and Melville's) Orphic eloquence must organize and control – the transitory but potent force that threatens to collapse the human world of the *Bellipotent* into the Moment, into formless immediacy, detached from past, present, and future. Accordingly, we understand and value 'measured forms' because the contrary pressure of the anarchic is so firmly realized, and we perceive the *Bellipotent* not as an ideal of the human community but as an adjustment of that community to conditions that threaten it. But, undeniably, Melville does come very rough, for we see that the measured forms of order are artificial and always imperfect, and that their ultimate authority in the world of political and social action may well be Force. So much, then, for 'quiet' conservatism, for if the forms are a condition of the continuity of civilization, Melville has found the hypothetical ground in which we discover the terrible cost of this continuity.

NOTES

1 The first phrase is E.L.G. Watson's in 'Melville's Testament of Acceptance,' *New England Quarterly*, 6 (1933), 322. The second is F. Baron Freeman's, from

his edition of *Billy Budd* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1948), 115. The literature that has grown out of this dispute is enormous. The most detailed and useful summaries of the different arguments on either side can be found in Thomas Scorza, *In the Time before Steamships* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press 1979), H. Bruce Franklin, 'From Empire to Empire: *Billy Budd, Sailor*,' in *Herman Melville: Reassessments*, ed A. Robert Lee (London: Vision Press 1984), 199–216, and Merton M. Sealts, 'Innocence and Infamy: *Billy Budd, Sailor*,' in *A Companion to Melville Studies*, ed John Bryant (New York: Greenwood Press 1986), 407–32. For a deconstructionist's resolution of this disagreement, see Barbara Johnson, 'Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*,' *Studies in Romanticism*, (1979), 567–99.

2 Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr, eds, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962), 128. All further references will be made to this edition.

3 Marlene Longenecker, 'Captain Vere and the Form of Truth,' *Studies in Short Fiction*, 14 (1977), 338.

4 Eric Mottram, 'Orpheus and Measured Forms: Law, Madness, and Reticence in Melville,' in *New Perspectives on Melville*, ed Faith Pullin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1978), 250.

5 Allen Tate, 'Techniques of Fiction,' in *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press 1968), 132.

6 This is a view of Orpheus that nearly every critic of *Billy Budd* appears to have swallowed whole. For a useful discussion of Emerson's commitment, see R.A. Yoder, *Emerson and the Orphic Poet in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1978).

7 Horace, *Epistles II.3* (*The Art of Poetry*), 391–400 in *The Satires and Epistles of Horace*, trans Smith Palmer Bovie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1959).

8 Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*, ed Vincenzo Roman, 2 vols (Bari 1951), 5.12 (I, 244–7), as quoted in Thomas H. Cain, 'Spenser and the Renaissance Orpheus,' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 41 (1971), 27–8. The translation is Cain's.

9 Natalis Comes, *Mythologiae sive explicationis fabularum libri decem* (Venice 1568), 7.14 (226v–9v), as quoted in Cain, 27–8. The translation, again, is Cain's.

10 Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, IV.ii.1.

11 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London: Dent 1984), 198.

12 Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans John Black (London: Bohn 1846), 342–3. Plato, not inconsistently, cannot resist an analogy between the lawmaker and the tragic poet. In the *Laws*, for example, the activity of the Lawmaker is comparable to, and rivals, that of the tragic poet: 'Most excellent of Strangers, we ourselves, to the best of our ability, are the authors of a tragedy at once superlatively fair and good; at least, all our policy is framed as a representation of the fairest and best life, which is in reality, as we assert, the truest tragedy. Thus we are composers of the same things as yourselves, rivals of yours as artists and actors of the fairest drama,

which, as our hope is, true law, and it alone, is by nature competent to complete' (*Laws* 817B, trans R.G. Bury, LCL [London: Heinemann 1926]). For a discussion of this passage, and of the relation between law and ancient literary theory, see Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1986).

13 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, I, ed Barbara Rooke, vol IV of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, general ed Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1969), 169.

14 Coleridge, 170.

15 Coleridge, 171.

16 The great power of the tale partly resides in the simple fact that one cannot be *certain* that deferring action would result in insurrection – just as one cannot be certain that applying the letter of the law *wouldn't* result in catastrophe. Vere has to make judgments and act, as we all do, on the basis of probability.

17 This helps us answer Christopher Sten, 'Vere's Use of the "Forms": Means and Ends in *Billy Budd*,' *American Literature*, 47 (1975), 48. Although Sten is aware of the Orpheus of the humanist tradition, he claims that it has little connection with Vere, for, as he says, 'unlike Vere, Orpheus achieved control over the ship's company [on board the Argo] by the eloquence of his poetry.' But we shall see that there is an Orphic eloquence to Vere's actions inasmuch as they are brought to life and given a body by Melville's eloquence as a storyteller. If we recall Melville's defence of Nelson's supposed 'vainglory' against the martial utilitarians, we can see how this conforms with his conception of the proper role of the poet. His eloquence, in fact, serves as a register and decorous equivalent of, in these circumstances, the actions of a great man. If Nelson's 'ornate publication' of himself is vainglory, 'then,' as Melville puts it, 'affectation and fustian is each more heroic line in the great epics and dramas, since in such lines the poet but embodies in verse those exhalations of sentiment that a nature like Nelson, the opportunity being given, vitalizes into acts' (58). Melville refers to other treatments of the hero by poets, notably Tennyson's poem on Wellington. We are invited to conclude that, in a sense, Melville is Vere's Tennyson – that is, Melville is to Vere as Tennyson is to Wellington: he records the eloquence of action in the eloquence of words, although Tennyson, in this regard, is no Melville.

18 Critics are, of course, fond of pointing out what appear to be Vere's numerous procedural errors. See, for example, C.B. Ives, '*Billy Budd* and the Articles of War,' *American Literature*, 34 (1962), 30–6 and, more recently, Richard Weisberg, 'How Judges Speak: Some Lessons on Adjudication in *Billy Budd, Sailor* with an Application to Justice Rehnquist,' *New York University Law Review*, 57 (1982), 1–69. A revised version of this article appears in Weisberg's book, *The Failure of the Word: The Protagonist as Lawyer in Modern Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1984). But, as Hayford and Sealts demonstrate (Hayford and Sealts, 175–6), the errors are Melville's, not Vere's. For an illuminating discussion of the legal issues raised in *Billy Budd*, see Richard A.

Posner, *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1988), 155–65.

19 Ives, 36.

20 Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Norton 1967), 402.

21 Yoder, 73. Water, because of its dissolving capacity, is an agent that restores man to Divinity, that returns him to the unfathomable and fluid Whole. For Emerson, the office of the Orphic poet is to create this effect: 'There's a melody born of melody, / Which melts the world into a sea' (Emerson, 'Destiny,' in *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol II [New York: William H. Wise 1929], 844).

22 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 140.

23 For a very fine discussion of this passage, and of *Moby-Dick* generally, see Graham Burns, 'The Unshored World of *Moby-Dick*,' *Critical Review* (Melbourne), no. 13 (1970), 68–83.